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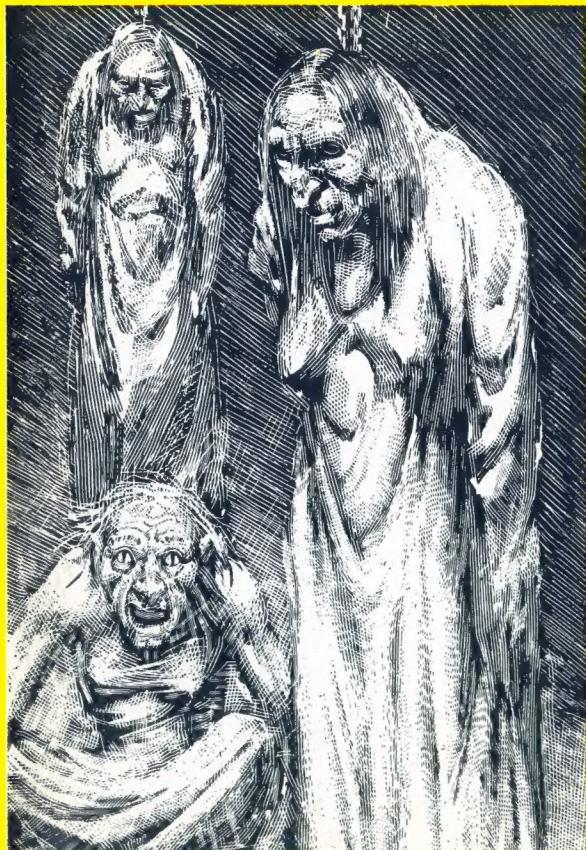
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MAGAZINE OF HORROR

BIZARRE

• **FRIGHTENING**

• **GRUESOME**



KINGS OF THE NIGHT

The Last of The
"King Kull" Stories
by ROBERT E.
HOWARD



NASTURTIA

by Col. S. P.
MEEK



THE DARK

STAR
by G. G.
Pendarves



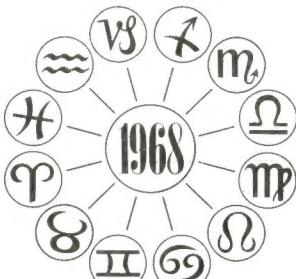
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magazine of
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The Bizarre and The Unusual

Volume 4

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, Editor

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The Editor's Page

For a number of years now, many of you, the readers, have been urging us to reprint the "John Silence" stories by Algernon Blackwood. Blackwood being among my oldtime favorites in weird fiction, even though I had not read very many of his stories, the suggestion fell on friendly ears. The difficulty was finding a copy of the book. All thanks, then, to *Joseph Kankowski* of Westwood, New Jersey, who loaned me a copy of the out-of-print American edition of the book; and to *Bob Righetti*, who donated a copy of the British edition, which is still in print.

One difficulty was the length of the stories; with a single exception, which I estimate at 13,000 words, all are close to 20,000 or close to 30,000 words in length. *A Psychical Invasion* is 20,000 words. Now we have, of course, run stories this length—and longer in the instance of *Wolves of Darkness*, by Jack Williamson—complete in a single issue. But these were stories which, so far as I knew, were available only in very old issues of magazines, hard to find even if one has the price. Any particular reader *might* have a copy of that issue, *might* have re-read the story more or less recently; but the odds are in our favor—either that you, the individual reader have never read the story before at all, or that you have not read it recently, or that you do not have a copy of any other magazine or book which contains the story. (I do not have access to

a bibliography which lists *all* the hard-cover anthologizations of stories originally published in magazines such as *WEIRD TALES*, *STRANGE TALES*, etc.)

With a hard cover book that is still in print, even if only a British edition, the odds are reduced. I do not know what percentage of you, the readers, are collectors; but I do know that a sizeable percentage exists. This percentage, I am sure is a minority; I want to avoid disappointing the minority, so far as possible, without depriving the majority. To occupy half, or nearly half, of an issue with a story that may well be familiar to this minority does not strike me as being good policy; but it is another thing to ask this minority to accept the possibility that a novelet-length installment of a two-part serial may be familiar. This will not pre-empt the contents of an issue the way a 20,000 word novelet (or short novel, whichever you prefer to call it) would do.

This, then, is our tentative policy for serials. It is subject to revision if, and when, a majority of you, the active readers, desire revision. A story over 15,000 words, that is likely to be familiar to the collectors, will be broken up into two parts—unless it just isn't breakable, that way; on the other hand, a more obscure short novel of 30,000 words might well be broken up into two 15,000 word installments.

(Turn To Page 86)

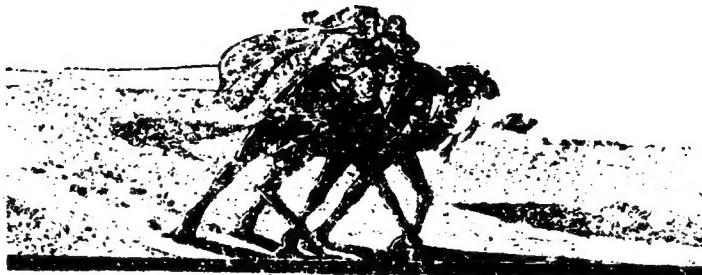
Kings Of The Night

by Robert E. Howard

(author of *Skulls in the Stars*, *Out of the Deep*, etc.)

The August 1929 issue of WEIRD TALES presented not only the first of a series of weird mysteries by Gaston Leroux (*The Inn of Terror*, which we reprinted in *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES* #3, Winter '66/67) and the second installment of Edmond Hamilton's thrilling interstellar novel, *Outside the Universe* (Ace Books F271) but also the first of a new series by ROBERT E. HOWARD, who had scored the year before when he introduced Solomon Kane. *The Shadow Kingdom* was followed in the next issue by *The Mirrors of Tuzan Thune*. Readers waited for more adventures of King Kull of Valusia, but it was over a year before the present tale appeared, in which Kull is a featured player rather than the star. Lancer Books has now presented a volume of King Kull stories, some of them collaborations in the same sense that the Sprague de Camp "Howard" stories have been, but this terminal story does not appear there. Glenn Lord tells me that it is due for presentation in another Howard collection later.

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Decoration by Andrew Brosnatch

The Caesar lolled on his ivory throne—
His iron legions came
To break a king in a land unknown,
And a race without a name.

— *The Song of Bran*

THE DAGGER FLASHED DOWNWARD. A sharp cry broke in a gasp. The form on the rough altar twitched convulsively and lay still. The jagged flint edge sawed at the crimsoned breast, and thin bony fingers, ghastly dyed, tore out the still twitching heart. Under matted white brows, sharp eyes gleamed with a ferocious intensity.

Besides the slayer, four men stood about the crude pile of stones that formed the altar of the God of Shadows. One was of medium height, lithely built, scantily clad, whose black hair was confined by a narrow iron band in the center of which gleamed a single red jewel. Of the others, two were dark like the first. But where he was lithe, they were stocky and misshapen, with knotted limbs, and tangled hair falling over sloping brows. His face denoted intelligence and implacable will; theirs merely a beast-like ferocity. The fourth man had little in common with the rest. Nearly a head taller, though his hair was black as theirs, his skin was comparatively light and he was gray-eyed. He eyed the proceedings with little favor.

And, in truth, Cormac of Connacht was little at ease. The Druids of his own isle of Erin had strange dark rites of worship, but nothing like

this. Dark trees shut in this grim scene, lit by a single torch. Through the branches moaned an eery night-wind. Cormac was alone among men of a strange race and he had just seen the heart of a man ripped from his still pulsing body. Now the ancient priest, who looked scarcely human, was glaring at the throbbing thing. Cormac shuddered, glancing at him who wore the jewel. Did Bran Mak Morn, king of the Picts, believe that this white-bearded old butcher could foretell events by scanning a bleeding human heart? The dark eyes of the king were inscrutable. There were strange depths to the man that Cormac could not fathom, nor any other man.

"The portents are good!" exclaimed the priest wildly, speaking more to the two chieftains than to Bran. "Here from the pulsing heart of a captive Roman I read—defeat for the arms of Rome! Triumph for the sons of the heather!"

The two savages murmured beneath their breath, their fierce eyes smoldering.

"Go and prepare your clans for battle," said the king, and they lumbered away with the ape-like gait assumed by such stunted giants. Paying no more heed to the priest who was examining the ghastly ruin on the altar, Bran beckoned to Cormac. The Gael followed him with alacrity. Once out of that grim grove, under the starlight, he breathed more freely. They stood on an eminence, looking out over long swelling undulations of gently waving heather. Near at hand a few fires twinkled, their fewness giving scant evidence of the hordes of tribesmen who lay close by. Beyond these were more fires and beyond these still more, which last marked the camp of Cormac's own men, hard-riding, hard-fighting Gaels, who were of that band which was just beginning to get a foothold on the western coast of Caledonia—the nucleus of what was later to become the kingdom of Dalriadia. To the left of these, other fires gleamed.

And far away to the south were more fires—mere pinpoints of light. But even at that distance the Pictish king and his Celtic ally could see that these fires were laid out in regular order.

"The fires of the legions," muttered Bran. "The fires that have lit a path around the world. The men who light those fires have trampled the races under their iron heels. And now—we of the heather have our backs at the wall. What will fall on the morrow?"

"Victory for us, says the priest," answered Cormac.

Bran made an impatient gesture. "Moonlight on the ocean. Wind in the fir tops. Do you think that I put faith in such mummary? Or that I enjoyed the butchery of a captive legionary? I must hearten my people;

it was for Gron and Bocah that I let old Gonar read the portents. The warriors will fight better."

"And Gonar?"

Bran laughed. "Gonar is too old to believe—anything. He was high priest of the Shadows a score of years before I was born. He claims direct descent from that Gonar who was a wizard in the days of Brule, the Spear-slayer who was the first of my line. No man knows how old he is—sometimes I think he is the original Gonar himself!"

"At least," said a mocking voice, and Cormac started as a dim shape appeared at his side, "at least I have learned that in order to keep the faith and trust of the people, a wise man must appear to be a fool. I know secrets that would blast even your brain, Bran, should I speak them. But in order that the people may believe in me, I must descend to such things as they think proper magic—and prance and yell and rattle snakeskins, and dabble about in human blood and chicken livers."

Cormac looked at the ancient with new interest. The semi-madness of his appearance had vanished. He was no longer the charlatan, the spell-mumbling shaman. The starlight lent him a dignity which seemed to increase his very height, so that he stood like a white-bearded patriarch.

"Bran, your doubt lies there." The lean arm pointed to the fourth ring of fires.

"Aye," the king nodded gloomily. "Cormac—you know as well as I. Tomorrow's battle hinges upon that circle of fires. With the chariots of the Britons and your own Western horsemen, our success would be certain, but—surely the devil himself is in the heart of every Northman! And now that their chief, Rognar, is dead, they swear that they will be led only by a king of their own race! Else they will break their vow and go over to the Romans. Without them we are doomed, for we can not change our former plan."

"Take heart, Bran," said Gonar. "Touch the jewel in your iron crown. Mayhap it will bring you aid."

Bran laughed bitterly. "Now you talk as the people think. I am no fool to twist with empty words. What of the gem? It is a strange one, truth, and has brought me luck ere now. But I need now, no jewels, but the allegiance of three hundred fickle Northmen who are the only warriors among us who may stand the charge of the legions on foot."

"But the jewel, Bran, the jewel!" persisted Gonar.

"Well, the jewel!" cried Bran impatiently. "It is older than this world. It was old when Atlantis and Lemuria sank into the sea. It was given to

Brule, the Spear-slayer, first of my line, by the Atlantean Kull, king of Valusia, in the days when the world was young. But shall that profit us now?"

"Who knows?" asked the wizard obliquely. "Time and space exist not. There was no past, and there shall be no future. NOW is all. All things that ever were, are, or ever will be, transpire *now*. Man is forever at the center of what we call time and space. I have gone into yesterday and tomorrow and both were as real as today—which is like the dreams of ghosts! But let me sleep and talk with Gonar. Mayhap he shall aid us."

"What means he?" asked Cormac, with a slight twitching of his shoulders, as the priest strode away in the shadows.

"He has ever said that the first Gonar comes to him in his dreams and talks with him," answered Bran. "I have seen him perform deeds that seemed beyond human ken. I know not. I am but an unknown king with an iron crown, trying to lift a race of savages out of the slime into which they have sunk. Let us look to the camps."

As they walked Cormac wondered. By what strange freak of fate had such a man risen among this race of savages, survivors of a darker, grimmer age? Surely he was an atavism, an original type of the days when the Picts ruled all Europe, before their primitive empire fell before the bronze swords of the Gauls. Cormac knew how Bran, rising by his own efforts from the negligent position of the son of a Wolf clan chief, had to an extent united the tribes of the heather and now claimed kingship over all Caledon. But his rule was loose and much remained before the Pictish clans would forget their feuds and present a solid front to foreign foes. On the battle of the morrow, the first pitched battle between the Picts under their king and the Romans, hinged the future of the rising Pictish kingdom.

Bran and his ally walked through the Pictish camp where the swart warriors lay sprawled about their small fires, sleeping or gnawing half-cooked food. Cormac was impressed by their silence. A thousand men camped here, yet the only sounds were occasional low guttural intonations. The silence of the Stone Age rested in the souls of these men.

They were all short—most of them crooked of limb. Giant dwarfs; Bran Mak Morn was a tall man among them. Only the older men were bearded and they scantily, but their black hair fell about their eyes so that they peered fiercely from under the tangle. They were barefoot and clad scantily in wolf-skins. Their arms consisted of short barbed swords

of iron, heavy black bows, arrows tipped with flint, iron and copper, and stone-headed mallets. Defensive armor they had none, save for a crude shield of hide-covered wood; many had worked bits of metal into their tangled manes as a slight protection against sword-cuts. Some few, sons of long lines of chiefs, were smooth-limbed and lithe like Bran, but in the eyes of all gleamed the unquenchable savagery of the pre-meval.

These men are fully savages, thought Cormac, worse than the Gauls, Britons and Germans. Can the old legends be true—that they reigned in a day when strange cities rose where now the sea rolls? And that they survived the flood that washed those gleaming empires under, sinking again into that savagery from which they once had risen?

Close to the encampment of the tribesmen were the fires of a group of Britons—members of fierce tribes who lived south of the Roman Wall but who dwelt in the hills and forests to the west and defied the power of Rome. Powerfully built men they were, with blazing blue eyes and shocks of tousled yellow hair, such men as had thronged the Ceanantish beaches when Caesar brought the Eagles into the Isles. These men, like the Picts, wore no armor, and were clad scantily in coarse-worked cloth and deerskin sandals. They bore small round bucklets of hard wood, braced with bronze, to be worn on the left arm, and long heavy bronze swords with blunt points. Some had bows, though the Britons were indifferent archers. Their bows were shorter than the Picts' and effective only at close range. But ranged close by their fires were the weapons that had made the name Briton a word of terror to Pict, Roman and Norse raider alike. Within the circle of firelight stood fifty bronze chariots with long cruel blades curving out from the sides. One of these blades could dismember half a dozen men at once. Tethered close by under the vigilant eyes of their guards grazed the chariot horses—big, rangy steeds, swift and powerful.

"Would that we had more of them," mused Bran. "With a thousand chariots and my bowmen I could drive the legions into the sea."

"The free British tribes must eventually fall before Rome," said Cormac. "It would seem they would rush to join you in your war."

Bran made a helpless gesture. "The fickleness of the Celt. They cannot forget old feuds. Our ancient men have told us how they would not even unite against Caesar when the Romans first came. They will not make head against a common foe together. These men came to me because of some dispute with their chief, but I cannot depend on them when they are not actually fighting."

Cormac nodded. "I know; Caesar conquered Gaul by playing one tribe against another. My own people shift and change with the waxing and waning of the tides. But of all Celts, the Cymry are the most changeable, the least stable. Not many centuries ago my own Gaelic ancestors wrested Erin from the Cymric Danaans, because though they outnumbered us, they opposed us as separate tribes, rather than as a nation."

"And so these Cymric Britons face Rome," said Bran. "These will aid us on the morrow. Further I cannot say. But how shall I expect loyalty from alien tribes, who am not sure of my own people? Thousands lurk in the hills, holding aloof. I am king in name only. Let me win tomorrow and they will flock to my standard; if I lose, they will scatter like birds before a cold wind."

A chorus of rough welcome greeted the two leaders as they entered the camp of Cormac's Gaels. Five hundred in number they were, tall rangy men, black-haired and gray-eyes mainly, with the bearing of men who lived by war alone. While there was nothing like close discipline among them, there was an air of more system and practical order than existed in the lines of the Picts and Britons. These men were of the last Celtic race to invade the Isles and their barbaric civilization was of much higher order than that of their Cymric kin. The ancestors of the Gaels had learned the arts of war on the vast plains of Scythia and at the courts of the Pharaohs where they had fought as mercenaries of Egypt, and much of what they learned they brought into Ireland with them. Excelling in metal work, they were armed, not with clumsy bronze swords, but with high-grade weapons of iron.

They were clad in well-woven kilts and leathern sandals. Each wore a light shirt of chain mail and a vizorless helmet, but this was all of their defensive armor. Celts, Gaelic or Brythonic, were prone to judge a man's valor by the amount of armor he wore. The Britons who faced Caesar deemed the Romans cowards because they cased themselves in metal, and many centuries later the Irish clans thought the same of the mail-clad Northman knights of Strongbow.

Cormac's warriors were horsemen. They neither knew nor esteemed the use of the bow. They bore the inevitable round, metal-braced buckler, dirks, long straight swords and light single-handed axes. Their tethered horses grazed not far away—big boned animals, not so ponderous as those raised by the Britons, but swifter.

Bran's eyes lighted as the two strode through the camp. "These men are keen-beaked birds of war! See how they whet their axes and jest of the morrow! Would that the raiders in yon camp were as staunch as your

men, Cormac! Then would I greet the legions with a laugh when they come up from the south tomorrow."

They were entering the circle of the Northmen fires. Three hundred men sat about gambling, whetting their weapons and drinking deep of the heather ale furnished them by their Pictish allies. These gazed upon Bran and Cormac with no great friendliness. It was striking to note the difference between them and the Picts and Celts—the difference in their cold eyes, their strong moody faces, their very bearing. Here was ferocity, and savagery, but not of the wild, upbursting fury of the Celt. Here was fierceness backed by grim determination and stolid stubbornness. The charge of the British clans was terrible, overwhelming. But they had no patience; let them be balked of immediate victory and they were likely to lose heart and scatter or fall to bickering among themselves. There was the patience of the cold blue North in these seafarers—a lasting determination that would keep them stedfast to the bitter end, once their face was set toward a definite goal.

As to personal stature, they were giants; massive yet rangy. That they did not share the ideas of the Celts regarding armor was shown by the fact that they were clad in heavy scale mail shirts that reached below mid-thigh, heavy horned helmets and hardened hide leggings, reinforced, as were their shoes, with plates of iron. Their shields were huge oval affairs of hard wood, hide and brass. As to weapons, they had long iron-headed spears, heavy iron axes, and daggers. Some had long wide-bladed swords.

Cormac scarcely felt at ease with the cold magnetic eyes of these flaxen-haired men fixed upon him. He and they were hereditary foes, even though they did chance to be fighting on the same side at present—but were they?

A man came forward, a tall gaunt warrior on whose scarred, wolfish face the flickering firelight reflected deep shadows. With his wolfskin mantle flung carelessly about his wide shoulders, and the great horns on his helmet adding to his height, he stood there in the swaying shadows, like some half-human thing, a brooding shape of the dark barbarism that was soon to engulf the world.

"Well, Wulhere," said the Pictish king, "you have drunk the mead of council and have spoken about the fires—what is your decision?"

The Northman's eyes flashed in the gloom. "Give us a king of our own race to follow if you wish us to fight for you."

Bran flung out his hands. "Ask me to drag down the stars to gem your helmets! Will not your comrades follow you?"

"Not against the legions," answered Wulfhere sullenly. "A king led us on the viking path—a king must lead us against the Romans. And Rognar is dead."

"I am a king," said Bran. "Will you fight for me if I stand at the tip of your fight wedge?"

"A king of our own race," said Wulfhere doggedly. "We are all picked men of the North. We fight for none but a king, and a king must lead us—against the legions."

Cormac sensed a subtle threat in this repeated phrase.

"Here is a prince of Erin," said Bran. "Will you fight for the Westerner?"

"We fight under no Celt, West or East," growled the viking, and a low rumble of approval rose from the onlookers. "It is enough to fight by their side."

The hot Gaelic blood rose in Cormac's brain and he pushed past Bran, his hand on his sword. "How mean you that, pirate?"

Before Wulfhere could reply Bran interposed: "Have done! Will you fools throw away the battle before it is fought, by your madness? What of your oath, Wulfhere?"

"We swore it under Rognar; when he died from a Roman arrow we were absolved of it. We will follow only a king—against the legions."

"But your comrades will follow you—against the heather people!" snapped Bran.

Aye," the Northman's eyes met his brazenly. "Send us a king or we join the Romans tomorrow."

Bran snarled. In his rage he dominated the scene, dwarfing the huge men who towered over him.

"Traitors! Liars! I hold your lives in my hand! Aye, draw your swords if you will—Cormac, keep your blade in its sheath. These wolves will not bite a king! Wulfhere—I spared your lives when I could have taken them.

"You came to raid the countries of the South, sweeping down from the northern sea in your galleys. You ravaged the coasts and the smoke of burning villages hung like a cloud over the shores of Caledon. I trapped you all when you were pillaging and burning—with the blood of my people on your hands. I burned your long ships and ambushed you when you followed. With thrice your number of bowmen who burned for your lives hidden in the heathered hills about you, I spared you when we could have shot you down like trapped wolves. Because I spared you, you swore to come and fight for me."

"And shall we die because the Picts fight Rome?" rumbled a bearded raider.

"Your lives are forfeit to me; you came to ravage the South. I did not promise to send you all back to your homes in the North unharmed and loaded with loot. Your vow was to fight one battle against Rome under my standard. Then I will aid your survivors to build ships and you may go where you will, with a goodly share of the plunder we take from the legions. Rognar had kept his oath. But Rognar died in a skirmish with Roman scouts and now you, Wulfhare the Dissension-breeders, you stir up your comrades to dishonor themselves by that which a Northman hates — the breaking of the sword word."

"We break no oath," snarled the viking, and the king sensed the basic Germanic stubbornness, far harder to combat than the fickleness of the fiery Celts. "Give us a king, neither Pict, Gael nor Briton, and we will die for you. If not — then we will fight tomorrow for the greatest of all kings — the emperor of Rome!"

For a moment Cormac thought that the Pictish king, in his black rage, would draw and strike the Northman dead. The concentrated fury that blazed in Bran's dark eyes caused Wulfhare to recoil and drop a hand to his belt.

"Fool!" said Mak Morn in a low voice that vibrated with passion. "I could sweep you from the earth before the Romans are near enough to hear your death howls. Choose — fight for me on the morrow — or die tonight under a black cloud of arrows, a red storm of swords, a dark wave of chariots!"

At the mention of the chariots, the only arm of war that had ever broken the Norse shield-wall, Wulfhare changed expression, but he held his ground.

"War be it," he said doggedly. "Or a king to lead us!"

The Northmen responded with a short deep roar and a clash of swords on shields. Bran, eyes blazing, was about to speak again when a white shape glided silently into the ring of firelight.

"Soft words, soft words," said old Gonar tranquilly. "King, say no more. Wulfhare, you and your fellows will fight for us if you have a king to lead you?"

"We have sworn."

"Then be at ease," quoth the wizard; "for ere battle joins on the morrow I will send you such a king as no man on earth has followed for a hundred thousand years! A king neither Pict, Gael nor Briton, but one to whom the emperor of Rome is as but a village headman!"

While they stood undecided, Gonar took the arms of Cormac and Bran. "Come. And you, Northmen, remember your vow, and my promise which I have never broken. Sleep now, nor think to steal away in the darkness to the Roman camp, for if you escaped our shafts you would not escape either my curse or the suspicions of the legionaries."

So the three walked away and Cormac, looking back, saw Wulhere standing by the fire, fingering his golden beard, with a look of puzzled anger on his lean face.

The three walked silently through the waving heather under the far-away stars while the weird night wind whispered ghostly secrets about them.

"Ages ago," said the wizard suddenly, "in the days when the world was young, great lands rose where now the ocean roars. On these lands thronged mighty nations and kingdoms. Greatest of all these was Valusia — Land of Enchantment. Rome is as a village compared to the splendor of the cities of Valusia. And the greatest king was Kull, who came from the land of Atlantis to wrest the crown of Valusia from a degenerate dynasty. The Picts who dwelt in the isles which now form the mountain peaks of a strange land upon the Western Ocean, were allies of Valusia, and the greatest of all the Pictish war-chiefs was Brule the Spear-slayer, first of the line men call Mak Morn.

"Kull gave to Brule the jewel which you now wear in your iron crown, oh king, after a strange battle in a dim land, and down the long ages it has come to us, ever a sign of the Mak Morn, a symbol of former greatness. When at last the sea rose and swallowed Valusia, Atlantis, and Lemuria, only the Picts survived and they were scattered and few. Yet they began again the slow climb upward, and though many of the arts of civilization were lost in the great flood, yet they progressed. The art of metal-working was lost, so they excelled in the working of flint. And they ruled all the new lands flung up by the sea and now called Europe, until down from the north came younger tribes who had scarce risen from the ape when Valusia reigned in her glory, and who, dwelling in the icy lands about the Pole, knew naught of the lost splendor of the Seven Empires and little of the flood that had swept away half a world.

"And still they have come — Aryans, Celts, Germans, swarming down from the great cradle of their race which lies near the Pole. So again was the growth of the Pictish nation checked and the race hurled into savagery. Erased from the earth, on the fringe of the world with our backs to the wall we fight. Here in Caledon is the last stand of a once mighty race. And we change. Our people have mixed with the savages of an elder

age which we drove into the North when we came into the Isles, and now, save for their chieftains, such as thou, Bran, a Pict is strange and abhorrent to look upon."

"True, true," said the king impatiently, "but what has that to do—"

"Kull, king of Valusia," said the wizard imperturbably, "was a barbarian in his age as thou art in thine, though he ruled a mighty empire by the weight of his sword. Gonar, friend of Brule, your first ancestor, has been dead a hundred thousand years as we reckon time. Yet I talked with him a scant hour ago."

"You talked with his ghost—"

"Or he with mine? Did I go back a hundred thousand years, or did he come forward? If he came to me out of the past, it is not I who talked with a dead man, but he who talked with a man unborn. Past, present and future are one to a wise man. I talked to Gonar while he was alive; likewise was I alive. In a timeless, spaceless land we met and he told me many things."

The land was growing light with the birth of dawn. The heather waved and bent in long rows before the dawn wind as bowing in worship of the rising sun.

"The jewel in your crown is a magnet that draws down the eons," said Gonar. "The sun is rising—and who comes out of the sunrise?"

Cormac and the king started. The sun was just lifting a red orb above the eastern hills. And full in the glow, etched boldly against the golden rim, a man suddenly appeared. They had not seen him come. Against the golden birth of day he loomed colossal; a gigantic god from the dawn of creation. Now as he strode toward them the waking hosts saw him and sent up a sudden shout of wonder.

"Who—or what is it?" exclaimed Bran.

"Let us go to meet him, Bran," answered the wizard. "He is the king Gonar has sent to save the people of Brule."

2

"I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule;
From a wild weird clime that lieth sublime
Out of Space—out of Time."

—Poc.

The army fell silent as Bran, Cormac and Gonar went toward the

stranger who approached in long swinging strides. As they neared him the illusion of monstrous size vanished, but they saw he was a man of great stature. At first Cormac thought him to be a Northman but a second glance told him that nowhere before had he seen such a man. He was built much like the vikings, at once massive and lithe—tigerish. But his features were not as theirs, and his square-cut, lion-like mane of hair was as black as Bran's own. Under heavy brows glittered eyes gray as steel and cold as ice. His bronzed face, strong and inscrutable, was clean-shaven, and the broad forehead betokened a high intelligence just as the firm jaw and thin lips showed will-power and courage. But more than all, the bearing of him, the unconscious lion-like stateliness, marked him as a natural king, a ruler of men.

Sandals of curious make were on his feet and he wore a pliant coat of strangely meshed mail which came almost to his knees. A broad belt with a great golden buckle encircled his waist, supporting a long straight sword in a heavy leather scabbard. His hair confined by a wide, heavy golden band about his head.

Such was the man who paused before the silent group. He seemed slightly puzzled, slightly amused. Recognition flickered in his eyes. He spoke in a strange archaic Pictish which Cormac scarcely understood. His voice was deep and resonant.

"Ha, Brule, Gonar did not tell me I would dream of you!"

For the first time in his life Cormac saw the Pictish king completely thrown off his balance. He gasped, speechless. The stranger continued:

"And wearing the gem I gave you, in a circlet on your head! Last night you wore it in a ring on your finger."

"Last night?" gasped Bran.

"Last night or a hundred thousand years ago—all one!" murmured Gonar in evident enjoyment of the situation.

"I am not Brule," said Bran. "Are you mad to thus speak of a man dead a hundred thousand years? He was first of my line."

The stranger laughed unexpectedly. "Well, now I know I am dreaming! This will be a tale to tell Brule when I waken on the morrow! That I went into the future and saw men claiming descent from the Spear-slayer who is, as yet, not even married. No, you are not Brule, I see now, though you have his eyes and his bearing. But he is taller and broader in the shoulders. Yet you have his jewel—oh, well—anything can happen in a dream, so I will not quarrel with you. For a time I thought I had been transported to some other land in my sleep, and was

in reality awake in a strange country, for this is the clearest dream I ever dreamed. Who are you ? "

"I am Bran Mak Morn, king of the Caledonian Picts. And this ancient is Gonar, a wizard, of the line of Gonar. And this warrior is Cormac na Connacht, a prince of the isle of Erin."

The stranger slowly shook his lion-like head. "These words sound strangely to me, save Gonar—and that one is not Gonar, though he too is old. What land is this ? "

"Caledon, or Alba, as the Gaels call it."

"And who are those squat ape-like warriors who watch us yonder, all agape ? "

"They are the Picts who own my rule."

"How strangely distorted folk are in dreams ! " muttered the stranger. "And who are those shock-headed men about the chariots ? "

"They are Britons—Cymry from south of the Wall."

"What Wall ? "

"The Wall built by Rome to keep the people of the heather out of Britain."

"Britain ? " the tone was curious. "I never heard of that land—and what is Rome ? "

"What ! cried Bran. "You never heard of Rome, the empire that rules the world ? "

"No empire rules the world," answered the other haughtily. "The mightiest kingdom on earth is that wherein I reign."

"And who are you ? "

"Kull of Atlantis, king of Valusia ! "

Cormac felt a coldness trickle down his spine. The cold gray eyes were unswerving—but this was incredible—monstrous—unnatural.

"Valusia ! " cried Bran. "Why, man, the sea waves have rolled above the spires of Valusia for untold centuries ! "

Kull laughed outright. "What a mad nightmare this is ! When Gonar put on me the spell of deep sleep last night—or this night!—in the secret room of the inner palace, he told me I would dream strange things, but this is more fantastic than I reckoned. And the strangest thing is, I know I am dreaming ! "

Gonar interposed as Bran would have spoken. "Question not the acts of the gods," muttered the wizard. "You are king because in the past you have seen and seized opportunities. The gods or the first Gonar have sent you this man. Let me deal with him."

Bran nodded, and while the silent army gaped in speechless wonder,

just within earshot, Gonar spoke: "Oh great king, you dream, but is not all life a dream? How reckon you but that your former life is but a dream from which you have just awakened? Now we dream-folk have our wars and our peace, and just now a great host comes up from the south to destroy the people of Brule. Will you aid us?"

Kull grinned with pure zest. "Aye! I have fought battles in dreams ere now, have slain and been slain and was amazed when I woke from my visions. And at times, as now, dreaming I have known I dreamed. See, I pinch myself and feel it, but I know I dream for I have felt the pain of fierce wounds, in dreams. Yes, people of my dream, I will fight for you against the other dream-folk. Where are they?"

"And that you enjoy the dream more," said the wizard subtly, "forget that it is a dream and pretend that by the magic of the first Gonar, and the quality of the jewel you gave Brule, that now gleams on the crown of the Morni, you have in truth been transported forward into another, wilder age where the people of Brule fight for their life against a stronger foe."

For a moment the man who called himself king of Valusia seemed startled; a strange look of doubt, almost of fear, clouded his eyes. Then he laughed.

"Good! Lead on, wizard."

But now Bran took charge. He had recovered himself and was at ease. Whether he thought, like Cormac, that this was all a gigantic hoax arranged by Gonar, he showed no sign.

"King Kull, see you those men yonder who lean on their long-shafted axes as they gaze upon you?"

"The tall men with the golden hair and beards?"

"Aye—our success in the coming battle hinges on them. They swear to go over to the enemy if we give them not a king to lead them—their own having been slain. Will you lead them to battle?"

Kull's eyes glowed with appreciation. "They are men such as my own Red Slayers, my picked regiment. I will lead them."

"Come then."

The small group made their way down the slope, through throngs of warriors who pushed forward eagerly to get a better view of the stranger, then pressed back as he approached. An undercurrent of tense whispering ran through the horde.

The Northmen stood apart in a compact group. Their cold eyes took in Kull and he gave back their stares, taking in every detail of their appearance.

"Wulhere," said Bran, "we have brought you a king. I hold you to your oath."

"Let him speak to us," said the viking harshly.

He cannot speak your tongue," answered Bran, knowing that the Northmen knew nothing of the legends of his race. "He is a great king of the South—"

"He comes out of the past," broke in the wizard calmly. "He was the greatest of all kings, long ago."

"A dead man!" The vikings moved uneasily and the rest of the horde pressed forward, drinking in every word. But Wulhere scowled: "Shall a ghost lead living men? You bring us a man you say is dead. We will not follow a corpse."

"Wulhere," said Bran in still passion, "you are a liar and a traitor. You set us this task, thinking it impossible. You yearn to fight under the Eagles of Rome. We have brought you a king neither Pict, Gael nor Briton and you deny your vow!"

"Let him fight me, then!" howled Wulhere in uncontrollable wrath, swinging his ax about his head in a glittering arc. "If your dead man overcomes me—then my people will follow you. If I overcome him, you shall let us depart in peace to the camp of the legions!"

"Good!" said the wizard. "Do you agree, wolves of the North?"

A fierce yell and a brandishing of swords was the answer. Bran turned to Kull, who had stood silent, understanding nothing of what was said. But the Atlantean's eyes gleamed. Cormac felt that those cold eyes had looked on too many such scenes not to understand something of what had passed.

"This warrior says you must fight him for the leadership," said Bran, and Kull, eyes glittering with growing battle-joy, nodded: "I guessed as much. Give us space."

"A shield and a helmet!" shouted Bran, but Kull shook his head.

"I need none," he growled. "Back and give us room to swing our steel!"

Men pressed back on each side, forming a solid ring about the two men, who now approached each other warily. Kull had drawn his sword and the great blade shimmered like a live thing in his hand. Wulhere, scarred by a hundred savage fights, flung aside his wolfskin mantle and came in cautiously, fierce eyes peering over the top of his out-thrust shield, ax half lifted in his right hand.

Suddenly when the warriors were still many feet apart Kull sprang. His attack brought a gasp from men used to deeds of prowess; for like

a leaping tiger he shot through the air and his sword crashed on the quickly lifted shield. Sparks flew and Wulhere's ax hacked in, but Kull was under its sweep and as it swished viciously above his head he thrust upward and sprang out again, cat-like. His motions had been too quick for the eye to follow. The upper edge of Wulhere's shield showed a deep cut, and there was a long rent in his mail shirt where Kull's sword had barely missed the flesh beneath.

Cormac, trembling with the terrible thrill of the fight, wondered at this sword that could thus slice through scale-mail. And the blow that gashed the shield should have shattered the blade. Yet not a notch showed in the Valusian steel! Surely this blade was forged by another people in another age!

Now the two giants leaped again to the attack and like double strokes of lightning their weapons crashed. Wulhere's shield fell from his arm in two pieces as the Atlantean's sword and sheared clear through it, and Kull staggered as the Northman's ax, driven with all the force of his great body, descended on the golden circlet about his head. That blow should have sheared through the gold like butter to split the skull beneath, but the ax rebounded, showing a great notch in the edge. The next instant the Northman was overwhelmed by a whirlwind of steel—a storm of strokes delivered with such swiftness and power that he was borne back as on the crest of a wave, unable to launch an attack of his own. With all his tried skill he sought to parry the singing steel with his ax. But he could only avert his doom for a few seconds; could only for an instant turn the whistling blade that hewed off bits of his mail, so close fell the blows. One of the horns flew from his helmet; then the ax-head itself fell away, and the same blow that severed the handle, bit through the viking's helmet into the scalp beneath. Wulhere was dashed to his knees, a trickle of blood starting down his face.

Kull checked his second stroke, and tossing his sword to Cormac, faced the dazed Northman weaponless. The Atlantean's eyes were blazing with ferocious joy and he roared something in a strange tongue. Wulhere gathered his legs under him and bounded up, snarling like a wolf, a dagger flashing into his hand. The watching horde gave tongue in a yell that ripped the skies as the two bodies clashed. Kull's clutching hand missed the Northman's wrist but the desperately lunging dagger snapped on the Atlantean's mail, and dropping the useless hilt, Wulhere locked his arms about his foe in a bear-like grip that would have crushed the ribs of a less man. Kull grinned tigerishly and returned the grapple, and for a moment the two swayed on their feet. Slowly the black-haired

warrior bent his foe backward until it seemed his pine would snap. With a howl that had nothing of the human in it, Wulfhore clawed frantically at Kull's face, trying to tear out his eyes, then turned his head and snapped his fang-like teeth into the Atlantean's arm. A yell went up as a trickle of blood started: "He bleeds! He bleeds! He is no ghost, after all, but a mortal man!"

Angered, Kull shifted his grip, shoving the frothing Wulfhore away from him, and smote him terrifically under the ear with his right hand. The viking landed on his back a dozen feet away. Then, howling like a wild man, he leaped up with a stone in his hand and flung it. Only Kull's incredible quickness saved his face; as it was, the rough edge of the missile tore his cheek and inflamed him to madness. With a lion-like roar he bounded upon his foe, enveloped him in an irresistible blast of sheer fury, whirled him high above his head as if he were a child and cast him a dozen feet away. Wulfhore pitched on his head and lay still—broken and dead.

Dazed silence reigned for an instant; then from the Gaels went up a thundering roar, and the Britons and Picts took it up, howling like wolves, until the echoes of the shouts and the clangor of sword on shield reached the ears of the marching legionaries, miles to the south.

"Men of the gray North," shouted Bran, "will you hold by your oath now?"

The fierce souls of the Northmen were in their eyes as their spokesman answered. Primitive, superstitious, steeped in tribal lore of fighting gods and mythical heroes, they did not doubt that the black-haired fighting man was some supernatural being sent by the fierce gods of battle.

"Aye! Such a man as this we have never seen! Dead man, ghost, or devil, we will follow him, whether the trail lead to Rome or Valhalla!"

Kull understood the meaning, if not the words. Taking his sword from Cormac with a word of thanks, he turned to the waiting Northmen and silently held the blade toward them high above his head, in both hands, before he returned it to its scabbard. Without understanding, they appreciated the action. Blood-stained and disheveled, he was an impressive picture of stately, magnificent barbarism.

"Come," said Bran, touching the Atlantean's arm; "a host is marching on us and we have much to do. There is scant time to arrange our forces before they will be upon us. Come to the top of yonder slope."

There the Pict pointed. They were looking down into a valley which ran north and south, widening from a narrow gorge in the north until

it debouched upon a plain to the south. The whole valley was less than a mile in length.

"Up this valley will our foes come," said the Pict, "because they have wagons loaded with supplies and on all sides of this vale the ground is too rough for such travel. Here we plan an ambush."

"I would have thought you would have had your men lying in wait long before now," said Kull. "What of the scouts the enemy is sure to send out?"

"The savages I lead would never have waited in ambush so long," said Bran with a touch of bitterness. "I could not post them until I was sure of the Northmen. Even so I had not dared to post them ere now—even yet they may take panic from the drifting of a cloud or the blowing of a leaf, and scatter like birds before a cold wind. King Kull—the fate of the Pictish nation is at stake. I am called king of the Picts, but my rule as yet is but a hollow mockery. The hills are full of wild clans who refuse to fight for me. Of the thousand bowmen now at my command, more than half are of my own clan.

"Some eighteen hundred Romans are marching against us. It is not a real invasion, but much hinges upon it. It is the beginning of an attempt to extend their boundaries. They plan to build a fortress a day's march to the north of this valley. If they do, they will build other forts, drawing bands of steel about the heart of the free people. If I win this battle and wipe out this army, I will win a double victory. Then the tribes will flock to me and the next invasion will meet a solid wall of resistance. If I lose, the clans will scatter, fleeing into the north until they can no longer flee, fighting as separate clans rather than as one strong nation.

"I have a thousand archers, five hundred horsemen, fifty chariots with their drivers and swordsmen—one hundred fifty men in all—and, thanks to you, three hundred heavily armed Northern prates. How would you arrange your battle lines?"

"Well," said Kull, "I would have barricaded the north end of the valley—no! That would suggest a trap. But I would block it with a band of desperate men, like those you have given me to lead. Three hundred could hold the gorge for a time against any number. Then, when the enemy was engaged with these men to the narrow part of the valley, I would have my archers shoot down into them until their ranks are broken, from both sides of the vale. Then, having my horsemen concealed behind the other, I would charge with both simultaneously and sweep the foe into a red ruin."

Bran's eyes glowed. "Exactly, king of Valusia. Such was my exact plan—"

"But what of the scouts?"

"My warriors are like panthers; they hide under the noses of the Romans. Those who ride into the valley will see only what we wish them to see. Those who ride over the ridge will not come back to report. An arrow is swift and silent."

"You see that the pivot of the whole thing depends on the men that hold the gorge. They must be men who can fight on foot and resist the charges of the heavy legionaries long enough for the trap to close. Outside these Northmen I had no such force of men. My naked warriors with their short swords could never stand such a charge for an instant. Nor is the armor of the Celts made for such work; moreover, they are not foot-lighters, and I need them elsewhere."

"So you see why I had such desperate need of the Northmen. Now will you stand in the gorge with them and hold back the Romans until I can spring the trap? Remember, most of you will die."

Kull smiled. "I have taken chances all my life, though Tu, chief counsellor, would say my life belongs to Valusia and I have no right to so risk it—" His voice trailed off and a strange look flitted across his face. "By Valka," said he, laughing uncertainly, "sometimes I forget this is a dream! All seems so real. But it is—of course it is! Well, then, if I die I will but awaken as I have done in times past. Lead on, king of Caledon!"

Cormac, going to his warriors, wondered. Surely it was all a hoax; yet—he heard the arguments of the warriros all about him as they armed themselves and prepared to take their posts. The black-haired king was Neid himself, the Celtic war-god; he was an antediluvian king brought out of the past by Gonar; he was a mythical fighting man out of Valhalla. He was no man at all but a ghost! No, he was mortal, for he had bled. But the gods themselves bled, though they did not die. So the controversies raged. At least, thought Cormac, if it was all a hoax to inspire the warriros with the feeling of supernatural aid, it had succeeded. The belief that Kull was more than a mortal man had fired Celt, Pict, and viking alike into a sort of inspired madness. And Cormac asked himself—what did he himself believe? This man was surely one from some far land—yet in his every look and action there was a vague hint of a greater difference than mere distance of space—a hint of alien Time, of misty abysses and gigantic gulfs of eons lying between the black-haired stranger and the men with whom he walked and talked. Clouds of be-

wilderment mazed Cormac's brain and he laughed in whimsical self-mockery.

3

"And the two wild peoples of the north
Stood fronting in the gloam,
And heard and knew each in his mind
A third great sound upon the wind,
The living walls that hedge mankind,
The walking walls of Rome."

— *Chesterton.*

THE SUN SLANTED WESTWARD. Silence lay like an invisible mist over the valley. Cormac gathered the reins in his hand and glanced up at the ridges on both sides. The waving heather which grew rank on those steep slopes gave no evidence of the hundreds of savage warriors who lurked there. Here in the narrow gorge which widened gradually southward was the only sign of life. Between the steep walls three hundred Northmen were massed solidly in their wedge-shaped shield-wall, blocking the pass. At the tip, like the point of a spear, stood the man who called himself Kull, king of Valusia. He wore no helmet, only the great, strangely worked head-band of hard gold, but he bore on his left arm the great shield borne by the dead Rognar; and in his right hand he held the heavy iron mace wielded by the sea-king. The vikings eyed him in wonder and savage admiration. They could not understand his language, or he theirs. But no further orders were necessary. At Bran's directions they had bunched themselves in the gorge, and their only order was—hold the pass!

Bran Mak Morn stood just in front of Kull. So they faced each other, he whose kingdom was yet unborn, and he whose kingdom had been lost in the mists of Time for unguessed ages. Kings of darkness, thought Cormac, nameless kings of the night, whose realms are gulfs and shadows.

The hand of the Pictish king went out. "King Kull, you are more than king—you are a man. Both of us may fall within the next hour—but if we live, ask what you will of me."

Kull smiled, returning the firm grip. "You are too are a man after my own heart, king of the shadows. Surely you are more than a figment

of my sleeping imagination. Mayhap we will meet in waking life some day."

Bran shook his head in puzzlement, swung into the saddle and rode away, climbing the eastern slope and vanishing over the ridge. Cormac hesitated: "Strange man, are you in truth of flesh and blood, or are you a ghost?"

"When we dream, we are all flesh and blood—so long as we are dreaming," Kull answered. "This is the strangest nightmare I have ever known—but you, who will soon fade into sheer nothingness as I awaken, seem as real to me *now*, as Brule, or Kananu, or Tu, or Kelkor."

Cormac shook his head as Bran had done, and with a last salute, which Kull returned with barbaric stateliness, he turned and trotted away. At the top of the western ridge he paused. Away to the south a light cloud of dust rose and the head of the marching column was in sight. Already he believed he could feel the earth vibrate slightly to the measured tread of a thousand mailed feet beating in perfect unison. He dismounted, and one of his chieftains, Domnail, took his steed and led it down the slope away from the valley, where trees grew thickly. Only an occasional vague movement among them gave evidence of the five hundred men who stood there, each at his horse's head with a ready hand to check a chance nicker.

Oh, thought Cormac, the gods themselves made this valley for Bran's ambush! The floor of the valley was treeless and the inner slopes were bare save for the waist-high heather. But at the foot of each ridge on the side facing away from the vale, where the soil long washed from the rocky slopes had accumulated, there grew enough trees to hide five hundred horsemen or fifty chariots.

At the northern end of the valley stood Kull and his three hundred vikings, in open view, flanked on each side by fifty Pictish bowmen. Hidden on the western side of the western ridge were the Gaels. Along the top of the slopes, concealed in the tall heather, lay a hundred Picts with their shafts on string. The rest of the Picts were hidden on the eastern slopes beyond which lay the Britons with their chariots in full readiness. Neither they nor the Gaels to the west could see what went on in the vale, but signals had been arranged.

Now the long column was entering the wide mouth of the valley and their scouts, light-armed men on swift horses, were spreading out between the slopes. They galloped almost within bowshot of the silent host that blocked the pass, then halted. Some whirled and raced back to the main force, while the others deployed and cantered up the slopes, seeking

to see what lay beyond. This was the crucial moment. If they got any hint of the ambush, all was lost. Cormac, shrinking down into the heather, marveled at the ability of the Picts to efface themselves from view so completely. He saw a horseman pass within three feet of where he knew a Bowman lay, yet the Roman saw nothing.

The scouts topped the ridges, gazed about; then most of them turned and trotted back down the slopes. Cormac wondered at their desultory manner of scouting. He had never fought Romans before, knew nothing of their arrogant self-confidence, of their incredible shrewdness in some ways, their incredible stupidity in others. These men were over-confident; a feeling radiating from their officers. It had been years since a force of Caledonians had stood before the legions. And most of these men were but newly come to Britain; part of a legion which had been quartered in Egypt. They depised their foes and suspected nothing.

But stay—three riders on the opposite ridge had turned and vanished on the other side. And now one, sitting his steed at the crest of the western ridge, not a hundred yeards from where Cormac lay, looked long and narrowly down into the mass of trees at the foot of the slope. Cormac saw suspicion grow on his brown, hawk-like face. He half turned as though to call to his comrades, then instead reined his steed down the slope, leaning forward in his saddle. Cormac's heart pounded. Each moment he expected to see the man wheel and gallop back to raise the alarm. He resisted a mad impulse to leap up and charge the Roman on foot. Surely the man could feel the tenseness in the air—the hundreds of fierce eyes upon him. Now he was half-way down the slope, out of sight of the men in the valley. And now the twang of an unseen bow broke the painful stillness. With a strangled gasp the Roman flung his hands high, and as the steed reared, he pitched headlong, transfixed by a long black arrow that had flashed from the heather. A stocky dwarf sprang out of nowhere, seemingly, and seized the bridle, quieting the snorting horse, and leading it down the slope. At the fall of the Roman, short crooked men rose like a sudden flight of birds from the grass and Cormac saw the flash of a knife. Then with unreal suddenness all had subsided. Slayers and slain were unseen and only the still waving heather marked the grim deed.

The Gael looked back into the valley. The three who had ridden over the eastern ridge had not come back and Cormac knew they never would. Evidently the other scouts had borne word that only a small band of warriors were ready to dispute the passage of the legionaries. Now the head of the column was almost below him and he thrilled at the sight of these men who were doomed, swinging along with their superb arrogance.

And the sight of their splendid armor, their hawk-like faces and perfect discipline awed him as much as it is possible for a Gael to be awed.

Twelve hundred men in heavy armor who marched as one so that the ground shook to their tread! Most of them were of middle height, with powerful chests and shoulders and bronzed faces—hard-bitten veterans of a hundred campaigns. Cormac noted their javelins, short keen swords and heavy shields; their gleaming armor and crested helmets, the eagles on the standards. These were the men beneath whose tread the world had shaken and empires crumbled! Not all were Latins; there were Romanized Britons among them and one century or hundred was composed of huge yellow-haired men—Gauls and Germans, who fought for Rome as fiercely as did the native-born, and hated their wilder kinsmen more savagely.

On each side was a swarm of cavalry, outriders, and the column was flanked by archers and slingers. A number of lumbering wagons carried the supplies of the army. Cormac saw the commander riding in his place—a tall man with a lean, imperious face, evident even at that distance. Marcus Sullius—the Gael knew him by repute.

A deep-throated roar rose from the legionaries as they approached their foes. Evidently they intended to slice their way through and continue without a pause, for the column moved implacably on. Whom the gods destroy they first make mad—Cormac had never heard the phrase but it came to him that the great Sullius was a fool. Roman arrogance! Marcus was used to lashing the cringing peoples of a decadent East; little he guessed of the iron in these western races.

A group of cavalry detached itself and raced into the mouth of the gorge, but it was only a gesture. With loud jeering shouts they wheeled three spears length away and cast their javelins, which rattled harmlessly on the overlapping shields of the silent Northmen. But their leader dared too much; swinging in, he leaned from his saddle and thrust at Kull's face. The great shield turned the lance and Kull struck back as a snake strikes; the ponderous mace crushed helmet and head like an eggshell, and the very steed went to its knees from the shock of that terrible blow. From the Northmen went up a short fierce roar, and the Picts beside them howled exultantly and loosed their arrows among the retreating horsemen. First blood for the people of the heather! The oncoming Romans shouted vengefully and quickened their pace as the frightened horse raced by, a ghastly travesty of a man, foot caught in the stirrup, trailing beneath the pounding hoofs.

Now the first line of the legionaries, compressed because of the narrow-

ness of the gorge, crashed against the solid wall of shields—crashed and recoiled upon itself. The shield-wall had not shaken an inch. This was the first time the Roman legions had met with that unbreakable formation—that oldest of all Aryan battlelines—the ancestor of the Spartan regiment—the Theban phalanx—the Macedonian formation—the English square.

Shield crashed on shield and the short Roman sword sought for an opening in that iron wall. Viking spears bristling in solid ranks above, thrust and reddened; heavy axes chopped down, shearing through iron, flesh and bone. Cormac saw Kull, looming above the stocky Romans in the forefront of the fray, dealing blows, like thunderbolts. A burly centurion rushed in, shield held high, stabbing upward. The iron mace crashed terribly, shivering the sword, rending the shield apart, shattering the helmet, crushing the skull down between the shoulders—in a single blow.

The front line of the Romans bent like a steel bar about the wedge, as the legionaries sought to struggle through the gorge on each side and surround their opposers. But the pass was too narrow; crouching close against the steep walls the Picts drove their black arrows in a hail of death. At this range the heavy shafts tore through shield and corselet, transfixing the armored men. The front line of battle rolled back, red and broken, and the Northmen trod their few dead under foot to close the gaps their fall had made. Stretched the full width of their front lay a thin line of shattered forms—the red spray of the tide which had broken upon them in vain.

Cormac had leaped to his feet, waving his arms. Domnail and his men broke cover at the signal and came galloping up the slope, lining the ridge. Cormac mounted the horse brought him and glanced impatiently across the narrow vale. No sign of life appeared on the eastern ridge. Where was Bran—and the Britons?

Down in the valley, the legions, angered at the unexpected opposition of the paltry force in front of them, but not suspicious, were forming in more compact body. The wagons which had halted were lumbering on again and the whole column was once more in motion as if it intended to crash through by sheer weight. With the Gaulish century in the forefront, the legionaries, were advancing again in the attack. This time, with the full force of twelve hundred men behind, the charge would batter down the resistance of Kull's warriors like a heavy ram; would stamp them down, sweep over their red ruins. Cormac's men trembled in impatience. Suddenly Marcus Suliis turned and gazed westward, where

the line of horsemen was etched against the sky. Even at that distance Cormac saw his face pale. The Roman at last realized the metal of the men he faced, and that he had walked into a trap. Surely in that moment there flashed a chaotic picture through his brain — defeat — disgrace — red ruin !

It was too late to retreat — too late to form into a defensive square with the wagons for barricade. There was but one way possible out, and Marcus, crafty general in spite of his recent blunder, took it. Cormac heard his voice cut like a clarion through the din, and though he did not understand the words, he knew that the Roman was shouting for his men to smite that knot of Northmen like a blast — to hack their way through and out of the trap before it could close !

Now the legionaries, aware of their desperate plight, flung themselves headlong and terribly on their foes. The shield-wall rocked, but it gave not an inch. The wild faces of the Gauls and the hard brown Italian faces glared over locked shields into the blazing eyes of the North. Shields touching, they smote and slew and died in a red storm of slaughter, where crimsoned axes rose and fell and dripping spears broke on notched swords.

Where in God's name was Bran with his chariots ? A few minutes more would spell the doom of every man who held that pass. Already they were falling fast, though they locked their ranks closer and held like iron. Those wild men of the North were dying in their tracks; and looming among their golden heads the black lion-man of Kull shone like a symbol of slaughter, and his reddened mace showered a ghastly rain as it splashed brains and blood like water.

Something snapped in Cormac's brain.

"These men will die while we wait for Bran's signal !" he shouted. "On ! Follow me into Hell, sons of Gael !"

A wild roar answered him, and loosing rein he shot down the slope with five hundred yelling riders plunging headlong after him. And even at that moment a storm of arrows swept the valley from either side like a dark cloud and the terrible clamor of the Picts split the skies. And over the eastern ridge, like a sudden burst of rolling thunder on Judgement Day, rushed the war-chariots. Headlong down the slope they roared, foam flying from the horses' distended nostrils, frantic feet scarcely seeming to touch the ground, making naught of the tall heather. In the foremost chariot, with his dark eyes blazing, crouched Bran Mak Morn, and in all of them the naked Britons were screaming and lashing as if possessed by demons. Behind the flying chariots came the Picts, howling like wolves

and loosing their arrows as they ran. The heather belched them forth from all sides in a dark wave.

So much Cormac saw in chaotic glimpses during that wild ride down the slopes. A wave of cavalry swept between him and the main line of the column. Three long leaps ahead of his men, the Gaelic prince met the spears of the Roman riders. The first lance turned on his buckler, and rising in his stirrups he smote downward, cleaving his man from shoulder to breastbone. The next Roman flung a javelin that killed Domnail, but at that instant Cormac's steed crashed into his, breast to breast, and the lighter horse rolled headlong under the shock, flinging his rider beneath the pounding hoofs.

Then the whole blast of the Gaelic charge smote the Roman cavalry, shattering it, crashing and rolling it down and under. Over its red ruins Cormac's yelling demons struck the heavy Roman infantry, and the whole line reeled at the shock. Swords and axes flashed up and down and the force of their rush carried them deep into the massed ranks. Here, checked, they swayed and strove. Javelins thrust, swords flashed upward bringing down horse and rider, and greatly out-numbered, leaguered on every side, the Gaels had perished among their foe, but at that moment, from the other side the crashing chariots smote the Roman ranks. In one long line they struck almost simultaneously, and at the moment of impact the charioteers wheeled their horses side-long and raced parallel down the ranks, shearing men down like the mowing of wheat. Hundreds died on those curving blades in that moment, and leaping from the chariots, screaming like blood-mad wildcats, the British swordsmen flung themselves upon the spears of the legionaries, hacking madly with their two-handed swords. Crouching, the Picts drove their arrows pointblank and then sprang in to slash and thrust. Maddened with the sight of victory, these wild peoples were like wounded tigers, feeling no wounds, and dying on their feet with their last gasp a snarl of fury.

But the battle was not over yet. Dazed, shattered, their formation broken and nearly half their number down already, the Romans fought back with desperate fury. Hemmed in on all sides they slashed and smote singly, or in small clumps, fought back to back, archers, slingers, horsemen and heavy legionaries mingled into a chaotic mass. The confusion was complete, but not the victory. Those bottled in the gorge still hurled themselves upon the red axes that barred their way, while the massed and serried battle thundered behind them. From one side Cormac's Gaels raged and slashed; from the other chariots swept back and forth, retiring and returning like iron whirlwinds. There was no retreat, for the Picts

had flung a cordon across the way they had come, and having cut the throats of the camp followers and possessed themselves of the wagons, they sent their shafts in a storm of death into the rear of the shattered column. Those long black arrows pierced armor and bone, nailing men together. Yet the slaughter was not all on one side. Picts died beneath the lightning thrust of javelin and shortsword, Gaels pinned beneath their falling horses were hewed to pieces, and chariots, cut loose from their horses, were deluged with the blood of the charioteers.

And at the narrow head of the valley still the battle surged and eddied. Great gods—thought Cormac, glancing between lightning-like blows—do these men still hold the gorge? Aye! They held it! A tenth of their original number, dying on their feet, they still held back the frantic charges of the dwindling legionaries.

Over all the field went up the roar and the clash of arms, and birds of prey, swift-flying out of the sunset, circled above. Cormac, striving to reach Marcus Sultus through the press, saw the Roman's horse sink under him, and the rider rise alone in a waste of foes. He saw the Roman sword flash thrice, dealing a death at each blow; then from the thickest of the fray bounded a terrible figure. It was Bran Mak Morn, stained from head to foot. He cast away his broken sword as he ran, drawing a dirk. The Roman struck, but the Pictish king was under the thrust, and gripping the swordwrist, he drove the dirk again and again through the gleaming armor.

A mighty roar went up as Marcus died, and Cormac, with a shout, rallied the remnants of his force about him and, striking in the spurs, burst through the shattered lines and rode full speed for the other end of the valley.

But as he approached he saw that he was too late. As they had lived, so had they died, those fierce sea-wolves, with their faces to the foe and their broken weapons red in their hands. In a grim and silent band they lay, even in death preserving some of the shield-wall formation. Among them, in front of them and all about them lay high-heaped the bodies of those who had sought to break them, in vain. *They had not given back a foot!* To the last man, they had died in their tracks. Nor were there any left to stride over their torn shapes; those Romans who had escaped the viking axes had been struck down by the shafts of the Picts and swords of the Gaels from behind.

Yet this part of the battle was not over. High up on the steep western slope Cormac saw the ending of that drama. A group of Gauls in the

armor of Rome pressed upon a single man—a blackhaired giant on whose head gleamed a golden crown. There was iron in these men, as well as in the man who had held them to their fate. They were doomed— their comrades were being slaughtered behind them—but before their turn came they would at least have the life of the black-haired chief who had led the golden-haired men of the North.

Pressing upon him from three sides they had forced him slowly back up the steep gorge wall, and the crumpled bodies that stretched along his retreat showed how fiercely every foot of the way had been contested. Here on this steep it was task enough to keep one's footing alone; yet these men at once climbed and fought. Kull's shield and the huge mace were gone, and the great sword in his right hand was dyed crimson. His mail, wrought with a forgotten art, now hung in shreds, and blood streamed from a hundred wounds on limbs, head and body. But his eyes still blazed with the battle-joy and his wearied arm still drove the mighty blade in strokes of death.

But Cormac saw that the end would come before they could reach him. Now at the very crest of the steep, a hedge of points menaced the strange king's life, and even his iron strength was ebbing. Now he split the skull of a huge warrior and the back-stroke shore through the neck-cords of another; reeling under a very rain of swords he struck again and his victim dropped at his feet, cleft to the breast-bone. Then, even as a dozen swords rose above the staggering Atlantean for the death stroke, a strange thing happened. The sun was sinking into the western sea; all the heather swam red like an ocean of blood. Etched in the dying sun, as he had first appeared, Kull stood, and then, like a mist lifting, a mighty vista opened behind the reeling king. Cormac's astounded eyes caught a fleeting gigantic glimpse of other climes and spheres—as if mirrored in summer clouds he saw, instead of the heather hills stretching away to the sea, a dim and mighty land of blue mountains and gleaming quiet lakes—the golden, purple and sapphirean spires and towering walls of a mighty city such as the earth has not known for many a drifting age.

Then like the fading of a mirage it was gone, but the Gauls on the high slope had dropped their weapons and stared like men dazed—*For the man called Kull had vanished and there was no trace of his going!*

As in a daze Cormac turned his steed and rode back across the trampled field. His horse's hoofs splashed in lakes of blood and against the helmets of dead men. Across the valley the shout of victory was thundering. Yet all seemed shadowy and strange. A shape was

illustration by Rankin



"Etched in the dying sun stood Kull."

striding across the torn corpses and Cormac was dully aware that it was Bran. The Gael swung from his horse and fronted the king. Bran was weaponless and gory; blood trickled from gashes on brow, breast and limb; what armor he had worn was clean hacked away and a cut had shorn half-way through his iron crown. But the red jewel still gleamed unblemished like a star of slaughter.

"It is in my mind to slay you," said the Gael heavily and like a man speaking in a daze, "for the blood of brave men is on your head. Had you given the signal to charge sooner, some would have lived."

Bran folded his arms; his eyes were haunted. "Strike if you will; I am sick of slaughter. It is a cold mead, this kinging it. A king must

gamble with men's lives and naked swords. The lives of all my people were at stake; I sacrificed the Northmen—yes; and my heart is sore within me, for they were men! But had I given the order when you would have desired, all might have gone awry. The Romans were not yet massed in the narrow mouth of the gorge, and might have had time and space to form their ranks again and beat us off. I waited until the last moment—and the rovers died. A king belongs to his people, and can not let either his own feelings or the lives of men influence him. Now my people are saved; but my heart is cold in my breast."

Cormac wearily dropped his swordpoint to the ground. "You are a born king of men, Bran," said the Gaelic prince.

Bran's eyes roved the field. A mist of blood hovered over all, where the victorious barbarians were looting and dead, while those Romans who had escaped slaughter by throwing down their swords and now stood under guard, looked on with hot smoldering eyes.

"My kingdom—my people—are saved," said Bran wearily. "They will come from the heather by the thousands and when Rome moves against us again, she will meet a solid nation. But I am weary. What of Kull?"

"My eyes and brain were mazed with battle," answered Cormac. "I thought to see him vanish like a ghost into the sunset. I will seek his body."

"Seek not for him," said Bran. "Out of the sunrise he came—into the sunset he has gone. Out of the mists of the ages he came to us, and back into the mists of the eons has he returned—to his own kingdom."

Cormac turned away; night was gathering. Gonar stood like a white specter before him. "To his own kingdom," echoed the wizard. "Time and Space are naught. Kull has returned to his own kingdom—his own crown—his own age."

"Then he was a ghost?"

"Did you not feel the grip of his solid hand?" Did you not hear his voice—see him eat and drink, laugh and slay and bleed?"

Still Cormac stood like one in a trance.

"Then if it be possible for a man to pass from one age into one yet unborn, or come forth from a century dead and forgotten, whichever you will, with his flesh-and-blood body and his arms—then he is as mortal as he was in his own day. Is Kull dead, then?"

"He died a hundred thousand years ago, as men reckon time," answered the wizard, "but in his own age. He died not from the swords of the Gauls of this age. Have we not heard in legends how the king of

Valusia traveled into a strange, timeless land of the misty future ages, and there fought in a great battle? Why, so he did! A hundred thousand years ago, or today!

"And a hundred thousand years ago—or a moment agone!—Kull, king of Valusia, roused himself on the silken couch in his secret chamber and laughing, spoke to the first Gonar, saying: 'Ha, wizard, I have in truth dreamed strangely, for I went into a far clime and a far time in my visions, and fought for the king of a strange shadow-people!' And the great sorcerer smiled and pointed silently at the red, notched sword, and the torn mail and the many wounds that the king carried. And Kull, fully woken from his 'vision' and feeling the sting and the weakness of these yet bleeding wounds, fell silent and mazed, and all life and time and space seemed like a dream of ghosts to him, and he wondered thereat all the rest of his life. For the wisdom of the Eternities is denied even unto princes and Kull could no more understand what Gonar told him than you can understand my words."

"And then Kull lived despite his many wounds," said Cormac, "and has returned to the mists of silence and the centuries. Well—he thought us a dream; we thought him a ghost. And sure, life is but a web spun of ghosts and dreams and illusion, and it is in my mind that the kingdom which has this day been born of swords and slaughter in this howling valley is a thing no more solid than the foam of the bright sea."

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WORLD-WIDE ADVENTURE

The Cunning Of Private Rogoff

by David A. English

When we read this story from an author new to us, I wondered if DAVID A. ENGLISH had drawn upon authentic Russian folklore, or invented his own. Either way, the story was charming, but I was curious. He replied in answer to my inquiry; "For the most part the Russian folklore in story is derived from Summers' *The Vampire in Europe*. But the shape of the tale has been given a little twist at the end, for it seemed to me that, in their traditional form, they tended to encourage over-confidence in dealing with those beings. Warlocks and the like couldn't be all *that* easy to overcome, I thought; else why did the folkloric countryside apparently pullulate with the critters?" We entirely agree.

AT LAST, FEELING THE TUG of home at his heart, Private Rogoff went to his captain. He was a good soldier, but he *did* miss the old folks.

"Well," said he, "I've been the Czar's soldier these six months." The captain looked at his little notebook and saw that this was true. "What of it?" asked the captain.

"Then isn't it time I had a furlough to see my village again and kneel at the old ones' feet?"

The captain agreed readily to that. "But take heed of yourself. The way is long and dark and perilous to the spirit and the flesh."

Private Rogoff could not but smile. "I'm the Czar's soldier," said he, "and they say crown property can neither be burnt in a fire nor drowned."

"Perhaps," said his captain.

It was evening by the time he set out. He could reach his village by morning, if he kept up a steady pace the way they had taught him.

The countryside through which he passed could not have been less pleasing. The gnarled limbs of trees naked of foliage, bleached by moonlight, had more the seeming of sick, white roots than of normal branches. The blank and starless sky was like that gloomy nether sky that grandmas maunder of. It tugged at his brow and eyeballs, so that he felt as if he had, all unawares, been inverted and walked on the underside of Earth.

"*Hst!*" said someone.

"Who's that?" bleated Rogoff.

"Take heed of the warlock that dwells down that road," called a grand-sire from the door of his crumbling cottage. "Best seek shelter for the night, young man."

"Thank you for your counsel, gran'ther," said Private Rogoff. "But a soldier of the Czar may not show fear. And they say—"

"You would do well to take the advice of serious and concerned old men," the old one snapped.

Private Rogoff continued his march. A crawling mist lapped around his boots. It was as clammy as the breath of a tomb, and so thick that a mouse might have walked on it if she stepped lightly.

The featureless sky had curdled into cloud, and the moon had climbed higher. White and gleaming, she fled through the dismal sky and dodged in and out of clouds. And Rogoff thought of a naked girl, shamed and terrified, pursued along a lonely road by cossacks. He did not like that thought one bit, but it hovered importunately round his mind's rear portals.

By the roadside he saw a gaunt individual tending a fire.

"Of course you may warm yourself," that one said, before he had been properly asked.

When he was seated by the fire, the gaunt one gave him some *kvass*. It took Rogoff, a soldier of the Czar, little enough time to dispatch the *kvass*, but before he was done the other stood up and kicked dirt over the fire. "Come on, Rogoff, we're going to a wedding."

When they reached the village, the festivities were in progress. Private Rogoff drank all the vodka he was offered and, upon a borrowed guitar, played some tunes he had learned in the barracks. He drank more vodka to oil his voice-box, and then was prevailed upon to narrate his military exploits. His uniform had made an impression on the lighter girls; he

was reeling about in the bushes behind the house, lured by the laughter of one of these, when he came upon his companion.

The gaunt one was moving his long, pale fingers in a fearful fashion. It was the motion of one who was weaving, but his hands were empty.

"What's going on?" our Rogoff asked.

"I'm weaving a spell."

"What kind of a spell?"

"You are aware, are you not, that the bride failed to kiss me?"

It's not proper to answer one question with another, but Private Rogoff said mildly, "An oversight, surely."

"No, she hates me. Let's go back to the house."

At the house, everyone slept. That was the spell, most likely. "You're the Warlock!" said Rogoff.

"Yes," said the Warlock.

The gaunt one went and made a tiny gash on the wrist of the bride and held a vial to it. Her blood flowed into the vial. He did the same to the groom.

Rogoff followed the Warlock into the woods. "What have you done?" he cried.

"Murdered them," said the Warlock. "I have their lives in my pockets — hers on the left side, his on the right." He patted his pockets in turn.

"I suppose there's no saving them now," muttered Rogoff.

"Wrong! If a cut were made on the ankle of first the one and then the other and their blood poured back in, they would recover." The Warlock smiled lewdly. "Only you would have to be very careful not to mix the vials. That would lead to a comical situation indeed."

"But it's easy to remember," says Rogoff. "She's on the left, he's on the right."

"You *are* a cunning rogue!"

Rogoff looked glum. "But it's not possible to overcome you, is it?"

"Wrong again! If you were to come on me during the daylight hours, when I'm helpless, and burn me to ashes, that would be the end of it. But you would have to look sharply, for if any animal — rat, or toad, or maggot — should escape from the pyre, my soul would be in it."

Some sly look in Private Rogoff's eye must have warned the Warlock. "Now I guess I'll have to tear you to rags," he drawled. "You know too much."

He took the chain from about his waist and advanced on Rogoff. Rogoff drew his sword. The chain whistled in the air around Rogoff's head and clashed against his sword. It was no easy matter to hold the

Warlock at bay and keep himself from being torn to rags. The battle seemed to go on for hours, but Private Rogoff was not the Czar's soldier for nothing; the Warlock could not penetrate his defense. A dim light appeared in the East, giving Rogoff the strength to continue.

At last the cock crew; the Warlock fell down like a broken doll. Rogoff dragged him back to the village. The wedding guests, having awakened, were bewailing the fate of the bridal couple. Rogoff quieted them. "That's easily remedied," said he. "Here's what we must do." And he told them.

While the wedding guests built a pyre for the Warlock, Rogoff personally supervised the removal of the precious vials from the gaunt one's pockets.

"She's on the left, he's on the right. I once heard some officers discussing Aristotle's physiology, and that's easy enough to remember."

"Don't mix them," cautioned the bride's mother.

"Certainly not!"

With Private Rogoff in anxious superintendence, the operation was performed. The newly-opened wounds greedily drank up the contents of the vials.

Vodka was given the couple to complete the revival of their spirits. The husky groom gingerly sipped his, but the bride tossed hers at the back of her throat like—well, like a soldier of the Czar! Rogoff stood proudly by while it was explained to them what had befallen.

Their reaction was extraordinary. The groom could not be prevented from kissing Private Rogoff most soundly in gratitude. Meanwhile the bride called wrathfully, if in piping tones, for a gun with which to hunt the Warlock.

Rogoff felt the earth, which he had bestrode so proudly but a moment ago, crumbling beneath his feet. If the Warlock had been *lying* . . .

From outside came cries of terror and dismay. Even above all that din, however, resounded the laughter of the Warlock.

On the pyre the Warlock's corpse had shrivelled to a cracked and blackened mannikin. Still it laughed and crowed in triumph. From it poured a pestilential torrent of maggots, toads, beetles and every manner of creeping vermin. There was no stopping them, and they spread across the countryside, bringing every region they penetrated under a gloomy and disastrous cloud.

"Now I've done it," muttered Rogoff.

The Brain-Eaters

by Frank Belknap Long

(author of *The Man with a Thousand Legs*, *The Space-Eaters*)

While the weird tales of FRANK BELKNAP LONG that were published in the 20s and 30s showed the influence of *H. P. Lovecraft*, as indeed they should—he and HPL were friends and correspondents for many years—they were never "imitations" of the Sage of Providence; from the very first story, *Death Waters* (WT, December 1924), Long showed a unique personality and viewpoint on horror and strangeness. The present tale has not, as yet, appeared in a collection of stories by this author.

STEPHEN WILLIAMSON, anthropologist and archeologist, stood at the rail of the *Morning Star* and watched the dim gray shape of the long boat shed its hazy indistinctness as the sun penetrated the fog and threw ruddy curlicues athwart the gleaming gunwales. From where Williamson was standing the occupants of the boat were distinctly visible. They sat immobile, in grotesque attitudes, and when Williamson hailed them they made no response. Williamson craned forward over the rail, studying them intently out of bloodshot eyes. Then, suddenly, his body went tense, and a cold horror descended upon him. He turned abruptly, cupping his hands, and shouted out a frantic warning to the first mate, who was standing rather nonchalantly amidships with his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets.

"Keep away from her! Ease her off! For God's sake—"

"What's that?" The mate strode to the rail and glanced anxiously over the side. But from where he was standing the boat was not visible.



(illustration by T. Wyatt Nelson)

He was obliged to repeat his query to Williamson, who occupied, for the moment, the position of ship's guardian. Below in his cabin the captain was raving impotently, his brain unhinged by liquor and fever.

"What did you say, Steve?"

"I said — stay clear of her!"

"Why?"

"Cholera, I think. Anyhow, it's awful! A death-trap. Keep clear of her."

In a moment the mate was by Stephen's side, staring with horror at the boat and its contents. It was drifting aimlessly in a long swell, its rudder askew and trailing sea-moss, its oarlocks sudden with caked salt and a darker, more disturbing ingredient that looked, from a distance, like caked blood. The mate gripped Williamson's arm. "They've been dead for weeks," he muttered, hoarsely. "Every man of 'em. They're nothin' more than skeletons." He spat to conceal his emotion. "Every man of 'em. God, Steve — "

"Look there!" Williamson had raised his arm and was pointing excitedly at the tallest of the seven skeletons.

The mate grew dizzy with horror. A choking, gurgling sound issued from his throat, and his hand tightened on his companion's arm till the latter cried out in shrill protest. "Steady, Jim." Then, after a pause, "It was cannibalism. Nothing else. But I can understand it, Jim. If the poor devils were insane, crazed—"

"But his *head*," the mate protested hysterically. "They couldn't eat that. Why did they cut off his head?"

The headless man sat bolt upright in the boat. He was clothed in stained gray trousers of woolen texture and a coarse seaman's shirt of alternating black and white stripes open to the waist. His feet were bare and sun-scorched. One arm, severed at the wrist, dangled forlornly from beside the oarlocks, rising and falling with the slow oily swell. The other was outstretched, as though it had been endeavoring, at the instant of death, to ward off the attack of something malign and unspeakable. On several parts of the hairy, exposed chest were dark and ominous stains. The muscles of the torso stood out so rigidly in the half-light that they were discernible at a distance of fifty feet.

But despite his mutilations and imperfections the headless man was easily the most commanding figure in the boat. The other occupants were pitiable in the extreme. They sprawled against the gunwales in attitudes of abject despair—mere husks of flabby skin over protruding bones, with skull-like faces and rigid, immobile arms. The sea had had its way with them. They were not merely dead; they were beginning, slowly, to blacken and shrivel and putrefy.

"It isn't cholera," said Stephen grimly.

The mate nodded. "You're right, I guess." His voice sounded hollow and unfamiliar even to his own ears. The strangeness of its timbre appalled him. He glanced almost hysterically at his companion. How, he wondered, could the man remain so cool? He had hitherto been so emotional, so easily upset. Yet now, somehow, the scientist in him was rising to the occasion, was astonishing the mate by his assurance and poise.

"We may as well lower a boat," said Stephen decisively. "I want to know precisely what happened. It's utterly ghastly, but I've got to know."

Thirty minutes later a decidedly ill scientist crossed the deck of the *Morning Star* in a strangely indirect fashion; crossed the deck in a semi-daze and gripped the rail till his knuckles showed white. For a moment he stood watching a Portuguese man-of-war scudding over the oily sea, his gaze riveted on the weirdly beautiful polyp till it disappeared in the purple haze fringing the horizon. Then, abruptly, he wheeled and met the inquisitorial scrutiny of the mate.

"Well?"

"I told Harris to put—sew sheets on the bodies," said Stephen in a cold and lifeless voice. "The least we can do is give them a decent burial."

The mate shivered. "I hope we can get it over with soon. A crew of dead men don't suit my fancy. If the captain should see 'em—in his condition, you know, it wouldn't be pleasant. I told Simpson to keep watch on the old man."

"I'm more concerned about the crew," said Stephen slowly. "They've been whispering and muttering ever since we brought the bodies aboard. Frightened blue, I guess. I don't know as I blame them. If they could see this diary"—Stephen tapped his pocket significantly—"they might—run amuck. To tell you the truth, Jim, it's got me frightened. I don't know what to think."

The mate moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. "It's crazy gibberish, Steve," he muttered. "They went through hell, apparently, and it's my guess this fellow Henderson cracked up under the strain. Bein' an officer and a gentleman—well, anyone could see he was only a frightened kid. I don't think I ever saw a man's face so drawn and despairful-lookin'!"

Stephen removed a weather-stained memorandum book from his pocket and began nervously to finger the pages. "There are things here, Jim," he said, "that you can't argue away. Descriptions, details. I'm convinced those men encountered something appalling. No thirst-crazed lunatic could have been so devilishly, inhumanly *logical*. Henderson remained courageously cool-headed to the very last. This entry shows what stuff the kid was made of."

Stephen had opened the book, and as the mate stared silently down into the almost motionless sea he began, slowly, to read:

"They want our *brains*. Last night one of them got in touch with me. It laid its cool face against my forehead and spoke to me. I could understand everything it said. A terrible death awaits us if we do not obey them implicitly. They want Thomas. We are to make no attempt to thwart or resist them when they come for him.

"Later.—They came for Thomas last night. *They did not take all of him*. He is sitting before me now. I can see his broad shoulders and back as I write. They are limned very terribly against the glare of the sunset, and they obtrude with a terrible vividness. His presence is a perpetual horror, but we dare not throw him overboard. *They* would not approve.

"I am perfectly sane. The horror has not dulled in any way my per-

ception of the visible realities about me. I know that I am adrift in the Pacific, fifty miles perhaps off the coast of Salvador, and that I am compelled to endure the presence of a headless corpse and five cowardly fools who gibber and moan like baboons merely because they lack guts and haven't sufficient water. My own stoicism bewilders and amazes me. Why is it that my hand does not tremble as I write, that I can remain so observant, so calm? It may be that I have lost all capacity to suffer. We have passed into a strange world—an alien and utterly incomprehensible world which makes the fears and agonies of common life seem curiously impersonal and remote.

"We have abandoned all hope of a possible rescue. Nothing can save us from *them*. It is amazing how completely I have resigned myself to the inevitable. Three days ago we were as confident as the devil. Why, we actually jested when the *Mary O'Brien* went down. Red Taylor called it a natty dive. She went down bow first. It was an enormously impressive spectacle. The water about her was a white maelstrom for full five minutes.

"'It's only a few miles to the coast,' I told them, 'and we've enough water to last a fortnight. We'll row in relays.'

"*They* are squat and slimy, with long gelatinous arms and hideous, bat-like faces. But I have reason to suspect they can change their form at will. For hours our ears were assailed by a horrible, maddening droning, and then—*we saw them*. We saw them glistening in the moonlight. All about us the sea was carpeted with their luminous, malignant faces. There was nothing we could do. We were helpless—stunned.

"*They are not animals.* They are inducted with a cold, unearthly intelligence. We have drifted into strange waters. Our compass revolves so maddeningly that it is useless as a guide. I have a theory—*incredible, fantastic*—which would account for all that has occurred, but I dare not confide it to the others. They would not understand. They are convinced, even now, that the things are fantastic fishes. They do not know that I have communicated with *them*. They did not see me last night when I left the boat and went with *them* into the abyss.

"They were deceived by the presence of my physical body, which remained with them in the boat. They did not suspect that I had descended into the dark, cold abyss.

"*They* were strangely reticent. They merely confided to me that they wanted Thomas' brain. They feed, it seems, on human brains, and of all our brains Thomas' is the most finely organized. It is compact, imaginative, sensitive. He is a semi-illiterate A.B.S., but his brain is first-rate. What interests them primarily is not so much the culture or cultivation

which a brain has acquired, but simply its naked intelligence. They experience strange, vivid new emotions and sensations when they feed on unspoiled human brains. But they do not really *eat* our brains. Rather, they suck, absorb them. They wrap themselves tightly about human heads, and suck out the contents of the cranium through the eyes and nostrils.

They do not always carry away the heads which they desire to use in this fashion. Occasionally they merely extract the brain while the victim is asleep. In such cases the poor wretch is certain to awake a raving maniac. Sightless—and a maniac. The other way is more merciful. I am glad that they severed Thomas' head and took it away. The presence of his body is a horror and a madness—but it is reassuring to know that he has ceased to suffer. The men are showing the effects of the torture. Brett has been whimpering pitifully for hours and Lang is as helpless as an infant. They want to throw Thomas' body into the sea, but I won't give my consent.

"They live at the bottom of the sea and are not a part of our familiar world. They inhabit another dimension. By some ghastly and inexplicable mischance we have passed into another dimension of space. We have passed into an *extension* of the three-dimensional world. The existence of these creatures confirms the wildest speculations of theosophists and mystics, who have persistently maintained that man is not the only intelligent inhabitant of the globe—that there are other worlds impinging on ours. Above the familiar seas of the world are imposed other invisible seas inhabited by strange and hideous shapes utterly unlike anything with which we are familiar. There is not one Pacific Ocean merely. Occupying the same space in *another dimension* are invisible Pacifics inhabited by strange shapes with hidden, malevolent powers. We have, unaccountably, sailed into one of these invisible worlds. We have passed from the coast of Salvador to the seacoast of an alien world.

"It is a very terrible world. Its denizens are more malignant than vampires. They raven on the brains of lost travelers from the three-dimensional Pacific.

"I had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion when they came for me and compelled me to follow them down through the blue depths to their strange, blue-litten city on the sea's floor.

"My body remained in the boat, but my brain was with them at the bottom of the sea. They can separate the brain *temporarily* from the body without any physical sundering. They were careful to explain to me why I should not share the fate of Thomas. They *need* me. I have been en-

joined to guard Thomas' body — to keep the others from throwing it into the sea.

"Another ship has passed into this strange and hideous world. On it there is a brain which they covet — an extraordinary brain — the brain of a scientist and poet. They desire to absorb it, and they desire to absorb it while it is aflame with curiosity and maddened by fright. When they can absorb a highly evolved brain that is keyed up to a pitch of wild excitement they experience the most intense ecstasy and rapture. So peculiarly are they constituted that they are capable of deriving the most piercing pleasure from highly evolved, highly inflamed cerebral tissue. In our world rare or alien manifestations of energy like radium, cosmic rays and things of that kind react most violently on terrestrial organisms and it is very conceivable that in this other world animal tissue — especially such highly evolved tissue as one finds in human brains — reacts with a similar intensity upon the alien body-substances of these creatures.

"The scientist — the man who is coming — has a brain which excites them immeasurably. They are determined to frighten and inflame it, and they think that if its possessor encounters Thomas sitting upright in the boat, headless and ghastly, it will become a rare delicacy and afford them the most exquisite rapture. They have asked me to help them and I dare not refuse. But I can at least record what I know and suspect in this book, and if he is not a blind fool he will strive to escape.

"I fear, though, that he is lost — hopelessly and irremediably lost.

"Like us he has in some mysterious way passed into another world. The ship which bears him has been drawn — sucked into some great vacuum or vent in three-dimensional space and is now in an utterly alien world. A black and abysmal world. Nothing *on Earth* can save him. His naked intelligence, perhaps — but nothing on Earth. The brain-eaters will not spare him.

"They will fasten upon his skull and drain it dry. His eyes will be drawn from their sockets, and his brain will melt and dissolve like tallow in the sun. Their moist, dark mouths . . .

"I am very ill. The ocean about me is carpeted with leering, malignant faces. The others see them, too. Brett is cringing and whining and foaming at the mouth like an epileptic, and Adams has collapsed against the gunwale. Blood is trickling from his nose and his eyes are drawn inward. His face is a mask — a corpse-mask. There is nothing we can do or say. We sit lifelessly by the oars and stare at Thomas' ghastly body, which has become a mockery, a menace. I have resigned all hope . . . "

Williamson closed the book and glanced anxiously at the man beside him. "Wouldn't you say, Jim, that there was *something* behind it?"

Jim looked exceedingly ill. "I don't know. It's all so very queer—uncanny. If there's any truth in it it's *your* brain they're after."

Williamson nodded. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Jim. I'm going to sleep on deck tonight. I'll bring up my cot and sleep here. I'll feel safer, somehow, on deck."

The mate lowered his head. "I'd do that," he said, simply.

It was after midnight when Williamson awoke and sat up. The moonlight lay in bright, luminous stripes on his cot and the wet planks of the deck. The lifeboats stood out boldly in the silver light, and from where he lay three huge water-barrels and a great pile of tarred rope were plainly visible. At first Williamson saw only these dim, familiar shapes; the water-barrels, the rope, the lifeboats swaying reassuringly in the wind. Then, slowly, he became aware of something dark and cumbersome, something opaque that obscured his vision and concealed a portion of the second barrel, something that made a pie-shaped dent in the pile of cordage. He rubbed his eyes; slowly, at first, then violently, hysterically. *A dark shape was clinging to the heavy netting above his bed.*

For a moment he stared at it in stark bewilderment. Then a great horror came upon him and he shrank back against the pillows. It was clinging to the netting and moving backward and forward like a great, slow-moving beetle. It was a moving blot, concealing the stars—a fetid dark blot against the spectral moon.

Nausea welled up within him. He started to rise, and then, suddenly, grew sick with terror incalculable. The strength ebbed from his limbs and his mind refused to function. He lay supine upon the coarse sheets, too stricken to move or cry out. The thing was slowly changing its shape. It was assuming a more definite contour, was waxing more malignant and agile. Stephen's eyes followed it helplessly as it moved up and down the netting. It was acquiring sight. It was acquiring the loathsome capacity to return his stare. Two luminous spots glowed malevolently down at him from its crawling bulk.

It was globular, and *wet*. From its dark sac-like body depended eight squirming tentacles. Or were they limbs? It was impossible to be certain. They were so maddeningly weaving and indistinct, at one moment swelling in girth, and then becoming so incredibly wire-like that they seemed to merge with the mesh of the netting which sustained them. But that the arms ended in thin, claw-like hands he did not for a moment doubt. The

hands were too constantly visible, too patently sinister. They fumbled with the netting, as though seeking to draw it apart.

He managed, somehow, to rise upon his elbows, to extend, invitingly, his exposed throat. It was not death he feared. It was the torture, the suspense. He could no longer bear to look into the horror's eyes. He had endured with agonized fortitude the sight of its drooling, bat-like mouth, and the odor of putrefaction, the sea-stench which surged from it; and even the fetid, fleshless hands with their long luminous fingers had not incited him to complete surrender. But its eyes held a threat which could not be evaded or endured. He did not want them to come any closer. If the hands broke through and the eyes came closer . . .

It was better to surrender unreservedly to the hands. So he raised himself on his elbow and bared his throat. It was a full minute before he perceived that he had been mistaken and that the hands were not seeking his throat.

They were busily engaged in recovering from the wet deck a large, round object of disturbingly familiar appearance. The thing had evidently been compelled to lay this object down for a moment in order to facilitate its ascent to the netting above Williamson's bed, and it was now intent on recovering its gruesome trophy. Slowly, deliberately, it raised the object in its terribly thin arms, caressing and fondling it, holding it very close, for a moment, to its moist and bulbous mouth. And in that same instant a hideous droning, that was like the thrum of huge engines in some vast and reverberant power-plant, smote menacingly on Williamson's ear. It was not the droning, however, which drove Williamson shrieking from the bed and across the deck in a straight dash toward the rail. It was something much more unendurable than any sound on earth.

It was the sight of a face, blue-cheeked and tortured, with matted red beard and white, pupilless eyes—a face distraught, yet immobile—a face that grimaced and glowered, and yet remained strangely, alarmingly impassive—the face of a dead man, the face of a corpse. There were dark stains above the temples, and the matted hair and beard were clotted with blood. The head was neckless—*unattached*. It seemed to float upon the air. In reality, however, it was being held very firmly in the terribly thin arms of something that wanted Williamson's brain, that wanted to do to Williamson what it had done to the object it was so proudly exhibiting. It was displaying the object unashamedly to Williamson because it wanted to terrify him—appall and terrify him utterly. It wanted to drive Wil-

liamson mad with fright so that it could fasten on his inflamed brain and drain it dry.

The mate, standing unsteadily upon the bridge, was alive to Williamson's peril. He had watched the scientist awake from a troubled sleep and had seen the dark shape moving backward and forward above the latter's head. He had also observed, with an actual physical retching, the round dark object on the deck, before the horror had reclaimed it. He was an imaginative man, and his brain, at that moment, was as agitated as the one which the horror coveted. But a mighty wave of fury against the thing that had come up from the sea blotted the fright from his mind. The barrel of the rifle in his hand glowed like a long blue taper in the moonlight. Slowly, with an almost hysterical deliberation, he raised the weapon to his shoulder and took aim.

The horror screeched twice shrilly as the bullet plowed through its dark body. It fell from the netting, twisted itself into a ball and rolled diagonally toward the scuppers. As it passed over the deck it left a thin blue trail of phosphorescent slime on the wet planks. Williamson turned from the rail, against which he had been clinging, and raised a stricken face toward the bridge. "It's no use," he shrieked. "Too many of them ! All about the ship ! I'm going !"

He started to climb upon the rail; and then, suddenly, his foot slipped and he went down with a thud. When he raised himself again to a sitting posture he was holding something dark and round between his hands and gibbering insanely. "No top to it ! No top at all !" he screamed. "The brain-pan's gone ! All sucked dry — nothing inside ! Oh my God !"

Two strong hands descended upon the mate's shoulders and abruptly, ruthlessly, he was pushed aside. A tall form in wet, glistening slicker took his place upon the bridge. The mate's eyes widened bewilderingly. "Captain Sayers," he muttered. "Captain Sayers . . . "

But the captain ignored him. He was shouting out commands at the top of his bursting lungs. "Put every stitch on her," he shouted. "Jump lively there !"

Part of the crew had emerged from the hatches and were running rapidly backward and forward in response to the captain's orders. After a moment he turned to the gasping mate. "We'll get out of this. Do as I say, and we'll get out of this. I know what's happened. We're in the wrong dimension. I was in it once before — years ago. Nothing to fear — if you'll do as I say. I know how to steer her. Five tracks to the right, a twist to the left and we'll be out of it. I *know*. I've been in touch with them for years. I'm psychic."

"Mad," groaned the mate. "Stark, raving mad!"

The captain had left the mate's side and was running frantically toward the wheel. "Keep them at it!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Tell them to square away. Can't put too much — do you hear?"

The mate nodded. "Worth tryin'," he muttered to himself. "Follow him implicitly. Nothin' to lose. He's in touch with 'em, maybe. Crazy people *are* psychic. They know things we don't." He raised his voice. "For God's sake, men, be quick. Do as the captain says. It's our only chance."

There ensued a race with destruction. The great ship hove to and trembled ominously, every sail on her taut with the breeze, while from the ocean there arose a screeching and a droning such as no sane man could endure with fortitude. The mate felt his reason tottering, even as the reason of the captain had departed, even as the mind of poor Williamson had succumbed — poor Williamson, who squatted hopelessly on the deck, his right hand supporting a horror of horrors, and his face a distorted mask in the spectral light.

But eventually they won through. The ship, under the captain's guidance, veered strangely on the dark waters. It veered about and rose on a mountainous swell, and even as the captain shouted orders into the attentive ear of the frightened helmsman the droning and screeching diminished in volume. One by one the hideous luminous faces faded from the luminous seas. The wind went down, and the ship floated serenely on a three-dimensional ocean.

Four hours later the sun came up over the coastal hills and flooded the ocean with a saffron light. Williamson, serene and at peace, stood silently by the rail and gazed with gratitude at the prone form of Captain Sayers. The captain lay asleep on the bed which the scientist had vacated on the previous night under circumstances which the mate could not bear to recall. But Williamson was the courageous one now. He dared to recall them. He gripped the mate's arm and smiled wanly.

"I'm glad you decided to obey the captain," he said. "Nothing else could have saved us. It was an heroic decision. The captain *knew*. I am convinced. Men whom the world calls insane — sick people, lunatics — are often *en rapport* with the invisible, the hidden. The fourth dimension is an open book to them. They see things which are hidden from us. And the captain *knew*."

The mate nodded. "I'm glad that they didn't take your brain, old fellow. It's too valuable an instrument. Aside" — he added with an ironic smile — "aside from friendship, I'm glad. You can go on with your work

now. You can get all that dope on the Mayas you missed last trip."

"I'll not write about the Mayas," said Stephen decisively. "I've much more important information to convey. My next book will deal with—*with them*."

The mate scowled. "No one will believe you."

"Perhaps not. But I'm determined to put that horror on paper. Some one, somewhere, may read it and understand."

The mate shook his head. "You'll lose caste. Your scientific friends will gibe and jeer at you."

Stephen's face set in grim lines. "Let them jeer," he muttered. "The knowledge that I'm in the right will sustain me." He drew himself up. "God, but it was a great experience. It nearly did for me, but I *know*, now, that the world isn't the pretty little affair we've always thought it. *Out beyond* are whetters of cosmic appetites. I've a cosmic appetite, Jim. I like to venture and explore. Perhaps, some day, they'll get my brain, but in the meantime . . ."

The mate smiled sympathetically. "I can guess how it is," he said. "There ain't any sailor this side of the Horn wouldn't understand. You're always hankerin' for what lies just around the corner."

"Or on the dark side of the moon," amended Stephen, with a wistful smile.



A Psychical

Invasion

by *Algernon Blackwood*

In his introduction to the 1942 re-issue, in England, of the John Silence stories, ALGERNON BLACKWOOD tells us that they had originally been conceived as separate imaginative studies on various psychic themes, and it was his publisher, Mr. Nash, who suggested that they be brought together under the aegis of a single central character, and published in a collection. They are, he says, "the dramatized emotions I registered in certain places". Although written before the Great War, this first of the series of five seems almost timely today, dealing as it does with consciousness-expanding drugs and a horrifying aftermath.

"AND WHAT IS IT makes you think I could be of use in this particular case?" asked Dr. John Silence, looking across somewhat skeptically at the Swedish lady in the chair facing him.

"Your sympathetic heart and your knowledge of occultism — "

"Oh, please — that dreadful word!" he interrupted, holding up a finger with a gesture of impatience.

"Well, then," she laughed, "your wonderful clairvoyant gift and your trained psychic knowledge of the processes by which a personality may be disintegrated and destroyed — these strange studies you've been experimenting with all these years — "

From *John Silence, Physician Extraordinary*, copyright 1909 by John W. Luce & Company;
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"If it's only a case of multiple personality I must really cry off," interrupted the doctor again hastily, a bored expression in his eyes.

"It's not that; now, please, be serious, for I want your help," she said; "and if I choose my words poorly you must be patient with my ignorance. The case I know will interest you, and no one else could deal with it so well. In fact, no ordinary professional man could deal with it at all, for I know of no treatment or medicine that can restore a lost sense of humor!"

"You begin to interest me with your 'case,'" he replied, and made himself comfortable to listen.

Mrs. Sivendon drew a sigh of contentment as she watched him go to the tube and heard him tell the servant he was not to be disturbed.

"I believe you have read my thoughts already," she said; "your intuitive knowledge of what goes on in other people's minds is positively uncanny."

Her friend shook his head and smiled as he drew his chair up to a convenient position and prepared to listen attentively to what she had to say. He closed his eyes, as he always did when he wished to absorb the real meaning of a recital that might be inadequately expressed, for by this method he found it easier to set himself in tune with the living thoughts that lay behind the broken words.

By his friends John Silence was regarded as an eccentric, because he was rich by accident, and by choice—a doctor. That a man of independent means should devote his time to doctoring, chiefly doctoring folk who could not pay, passed their comprehension entirely. The native nobility of a soul whose first desire was to help those who could not help themselves, puzzled them. After that, it irritated them, and, greatly to his own satisfaction, they left him to his own devices.

Dr. Silence was a free-lance, though, among doctors, having neither consulting room, bookkeeper, nor professional manner. He took no fees, being at heart a genuine philanthropist, yet at the same time did no harm to his fellow-practitioners, because he only accepted unremunerative cases, and cases that interested him for some very special reason. He argued that the rich could pay, and the very poor could avail themselves of organized charity, but that a very large class of ill-paid, self-respecting workers, often followers of the arts, could not afford the price of a week's comforts merely to be told to travel. And it was these he desired to help: cases often requiring special and patient study—things no doctor can give for a guinea, and that no one would dream of expecting him to give.

But there was another side to his personality and practice, and one with which we are now more directly concerned; for the cases that especially appealed to him were of no ordinary kind, but rather of that intangible, elusive, and difficult nature best described as psychical afflictions; and, though he would have been the last person himself to approve of the title, it was beyond question that he was known more or less generally as the "Psychic Doctor."

In order to grapple with cases of this peculiar kind, he had submitted himself to a long and severe training, at once physical, mental, and spiritual. What precisely this training had been, or where undergone, no one seemed to know—for he never spoke of it, as, indeed, he betrayed no single other characteristic of the charlatan—but the fact that it had involved a total disappearance from the world for five years, and that after he returned and began his singular practice no one ever dreamed of applying to him the so-easily acquired epithet of quack, spoke much for the seriousness of his strange quest and also for the genuineness of his attainments.

For the modern psychical researcher he felt the calm tolerance of the "man who knows". There was a trace of pity in his voice—contempt he never showed—when he spoke of their methods.

"This classification of results is uninspired work at best," he said once to me, when I had been his confidential assistant for some years. "It leads nowhere, and after a hundred years will lead nowhere. It is playing with the wrong end of a rather dangerous toy. Far better, it would be, to examine the causes, and then the results would so easily slip into place and explain themselves. For the sources are accessible, and open to all who have the courage to lead the life that alone makes practical investigation safe and possible."

And towards the question of clairvoyance, too, his attitude was significantly sane, for he knew how extremely rare the genuine power was, and that what is commonly called clairvoyance is nothing more than a keen power of visualizing.

"It connotes a slightly increased sensibility, nothing more," he would say. "The true clairvoyant deplores his power, recognizing that it adds a new horror to life, and is in the nature of an affliction. And you will find this always to be the real test."

Thus it was that John Silence, this singularly developed doctor, was able to select his cases with a clear knowledge of the difference between mere hysterical delusion and the kind of psychical affliction that claimed his special powers. It was never necessary for him to resort to the cheap

mysteries of divination; for, as I have heard him observe, after the solution of some peculiarly intricate problem:

"Systems of divination, from geomancy down to reading by tea-leaves, are merely so many methods of obscuring the outer vision, in order that the inner vision may become open. Once the method is mastered, no system is necessary at all."

And the words were significant of the methods of this remarkable man, the keynote of whose power lay, perhaps, more than anything else, in the knowledge, first, that thought can act at a distance, and, secondly, that thought is dynamic and can accomplish material results.

"Learn how to *think*," he would have expressed it, "and you have learned to tap power at its source."

To look at—he was now past forty—he was sparely built, with speaking brown eyes in which shone the light of knowledge and self-confidence, while at the same time they made one think of that wondrous gentleness seen most often in the eyes of animals. A close beard concealed the mouth without disguising the grim determination of lips and jaw, and the face somehow conveyed an impression of transparency, almost of light, so delicately were the features refined away. On the fine forehead was that indefinable touch of peace that comes from identifying the mind with what is permanent in the soul, and letting the impermanent slip by without power to wound or distress; while, from his manner—so gentle, quiet, sympathetic—few could have guessed the strength of purpose that burned within like a great flame.

"I think I should describe it as a psychical case," continued the Swedish lady, obviously trying to explain herself very intelligently, "and just the kind you like. I mean a case where the cause is hidden deep down in some spiritual distress, and—"

"But the symptoms first, please, my dear Svensky," he interrupted, with a strangely compelling seriousness of manner, "and your deductions afterwards."

She turned round sharply on the edge of her chair and looked him in the face, lowering her voice to prevent her emotion betraying itself too obviously.

"In my opinion there's only one symptom," she half whispered, as though telling something disagreeable: "fear—simply fear."

"Physical fear?"

"I think not; though how can I say? I think it's a horror in the psychical region. It's no ordinary delusion; the man is quite sane: but he lives in mortal terror of something—"

"I don't know what you mean by his 'psychical region,'" said the doctor, with a smile; "though I suppose you wish me to understand that his spiritual, and not his mental, processes are affected. Anyhow, try and tell me briefly and pointedly what you know about the man, his symptoms, his need for help, *my* peculiar help, that is, and all that seems vital in the case. I promise to listen devotedly."

"I am trying," she continued earnestly, "but must do so in my own words and trust to your intelligence to disentangle as I go along. He is a young author, and lives in a tiny house off Putney Heath somewhere. He writes humorous stories — quite a genre of his own: Pender — you must have heard the name — Felix Pender? Oh, the man had a great gift, and married on the strength of it; his future seemed assured. I say 'had,' for quite suddenly his talent utterly failed him. Worse, it became transformed into its opposite. He can no longer write a line in the old way that was bringing him success — "

Dr. Silence opened his eyes for a second and looked at her. "He still writes, then? The force has not gone?" he asked briefly, and then closed his eyes again to listen.

"He works like a fury," she went on, "but produces nothing" — she hesitated a moment — "nothing that he can use or sell. His earnings have practically ceased, and he makes a precarious living by book-reviewing and odd jobs — very odd, some of them. Yet, I am certain his talent has not really deserted him finally, but is merely — "

Again Mrs. Sivendson hesitated for the appropriate word.

"In abeyance," he suggested, without opening his eyes.

"Obliterated," she went on, after a moment to weight the word, "merely obliterated by something else — "

"By some *one* else?"

"I wish I knew. All I can say is that he is haunted, and temporarily his sense of humor is shrouded — gone — replaced by something dreadful that writes other things. Unless something competent is done, he will simply starve to death. Yet he is afraid to go to a doctor for fear of being pronounced insane; and anyhow, a man can hardly ask a doctor to take a guinea to restore a vanished sense of humor, can he?"

"Has he tried any one at all?"

"Not doctors yet. He tried some clergymen and religious people; but they *know* so little and have so little intelligent sympathy. And most of them are so busy balancing on their own little pedestals — "

John Silence stopped her tirade with a gesture. "And how is it that you know so much about him?" he asked gently.

"I know Mrs. Pender well—I knew her before she married him—"
"And is she a cause, perhaps?"

"Not in the least. She is devoted; a woman very well educated, though without being really intelligent, and with so little sense of humor herself that she always laughs at the wrong places. But she has nothing to do with the cause of his distress; and indeed, has chiefly guessed it from observing him, rather than from what little he has told her. And he, you know, is a really lovable fellow, hard-working, patient—altogether worth saving."

Dr. Silence opened his eyes and went over to ring for tea. He did not know very much more about the case of the humorist than when he first sat down to listen; but he realized that no amount of words from his Swedish friend would help to reveal the real facts. A personal interview with the author himself could alone do that.

"All humorists are worth saving," he said with a smile, as she poured out tea. "We can't afford to lose a single one in these strenuous days. I will go and see your friend at the first opportunity."

She thanked him elaborately, effusively, with many words, and he, with much difficulty, kept the conversation thenceforward strictly to the teapot.

And, as a result of this conversation, and a little more he had gathered by means best known to himself and his secretary, he was whizzing in his motor-car one afternoon a few days later up the Putney Hill to have his first interview with Felix Pender the humor writer who was the victim of some mysterious malady in his "psychical region" that had obliterated his sense of the comic and threatened to wreck his life and destroy his talent. And his desire to help was probably of equal strength with his desire to know and to investigate.

The motor stopped with a deep purring sound, as though a great black panther lay concealed within its hood, and the doctor—the "psychic doctor," as he was sometimes called—stepped out through the gathering fog, and walked across the tiny garden that held a blackened fir tree and a stunted laurel shrubbery. The house was very small, and it was some time before any one answered the bell. Then, suddenly, a light appeared in the hall, and he saw a pretty little woman standing on the top step begging him to come in. She was dressed in gray, and the gaslight fell on a mass of deliberately brushed light hair. Stuffed, dusty birds, and a shabby array of African spears, hung on the wall behind her. A hatrack, with a bronze plate full of very large cards, led his eye

swiftly to a dark staircase beyond. Mrs. Pender had round eyes like a child's, and she greeted him with an effusiveness that barely concealed her emotion, yet strove to appear naturally cordial. Evidently she had been looking out for his arrival, and had outrun the servant girl. She was a little breathless.

"I hope you've not been kept waiting—I think it's *most* good of you to come—" she began, and then stopped sharp when she saw his face in the gaslight. There was something in Dr. Silence's look that did not encourage mere talk. He was in earnest now, if ever man was.

"Good evening, Mrs. Pender," he said, with a quiet smile that won confidence, yet deprecated unnecessary words, "the fog delayed me a little. I am glad to see you."

They went into a dingy sitting-room at the back of the house, neatly furnished but depressing. Books stood in a row upon the mantelpiece. The fire had evidently just been lit. It smoked in great puffs into the room.

"Mrs. Sivendson said she thought you might be able to come," ventured the little woman again, looking up engagingly into his face and betraying anxiety and eagerness in every gesture. "But I hardly dared to believe it. I think it is really too good of you. My husband's case is so peculiar that—well, you know, I am quite sure any *ordinary* doctor would say at once the asylum—"

"Isn't he in, then?" asked Dr. Silence gently.

"In the asylum?" she gasped. "Oh dear, no—not yet!"

"In the house, I meant," he laughed.

She gave a great sigh. "He'll be back any minute now," she replied, obviously relieved to see him laugh; "but the fact is, we didn't expect you so early—I mean, my husband hardly thought you would come at all."

"I am always delighted to come—when I am really wanted, and can be of help," he said quickly; "and, perhaps, it's all for the best that your husband is out, for now that we are alone you can tell me something about his difficulties. So far, you know, I have heard very little."

Her voice trembled as she thanked him, and when he came and took a chair close beside her she actually had difficulty in finding words with which to begin.

"In the first place," she began timidly, and then continuing with a nervous incoherent rush of words, "he will be simply delighted that you've really come, because he said you were the only person he would consent to see at all—the only doctor, I mean. But, of course, he doesn't

know how frightened I am, or how much I have noticed. He pretends with me that it's just a nervous breakdown, and I'm sure he doesn't realize all the odd things I've noticed him doing. But the main thing, I suppose—"

"Yes, the main thing, Mrs. Pender," he said encouragingly, noticing her hesitation.

"—is that he thinks we are not alone in the house. That's the chief thing."

"Tell me more facts—just facts."

"It began last summer when I came back from Ireland; he had been here alone for six weeks, and I thought him looking tired and queer—ragged and scattered about the face, if you know what I mean, and his manner worn out. He said he had been writing hard, but his inspiration had somehow failed him, and he was dissatisfied with his work. His sense of humor was leaving him, or changing into something else, he said. There was something in the house, he declared, that"—she emphasized the words—"prevented his feeling funny."

"Something in the house that prevented his feeling funny," repeated the doctor. "Ah, now we're getting to the heart of it!"

"Yes," she resumed vaguely, "that's what he kept saying."

"And what was it he *did* that you thought strange?" he asked sympathetically. "Be brief, or he may be here before you finish."

"Very small things, but significant it seemed to me. He changed his workroom from the library, as we call it, to the sitting-room. He said all his characters became wrong and terrible in the library; they altered, so that he felt like writing tragedies—vile, debased tragedies, the tragedies of broken souls. But now he says the same of the smoking-room, and he's gone back to the library."

"Ah!"

"You see, there's so little I can tell you," she went on, with increasing speed and countless gestures. "I mean it's only very small things he does and says that are queer. What frightens me is that he assumes there is someone else in the house all the time—someone I never see. He does not actually say so, but on the stairs I've seen him standing aside to let someone pass; I've seen him open a door to let someone in or out; and often in our bedroom he puts chairs about as though for someone else to sit in. Oh—oh yes, and once or twice," she cried—"once or twice—"

She paused, and looked about her with a startled air.

"Yes?"

"Once or twice," she resumed hurriedly, as though she heard a sound that alarmed her, "I've heard him running—coming in and out of the rooms breathless as if something were after him—"

The door opened while she was still speaking, cutting her words off in the middle, and a man came into the room. He was dark and clean-shaven, rather, with the eyes of imagination, and dark hair growing scantily about the temples. He was dressed in a shabby tweed suit, and wore an untidy flannel collar at the neck. The dominant expression of his face was startled—hunted; an expression that might any moment leap into the dreadful stare of terror and announce a total loss of self-control.

The moment he saw his visitor, a smile spread over his worn features, and he advanced to shake hands.

"I hoped you would come; Mrs. Sivendson said you might be able to find 'time,'" he said simply. His voice was thin and reedy. "I am very glad to see you, Dr. Silence. It is 'Doctor,' is it not?"

"Well, I am entitled to the description," laughed the other, "but I rarely get it. You know, I do not practice as a regular thing; that is, I only take cases that specially interest me, or—"

He did not finish the sentence, for the men exchanged a glance of sympathy that rendered it unnecessary.

"I have heard of your great kindness."

"It's my hobby," said the other quickly, "and my privilege."

"I trust you will still think so when you have heard what I have to tell you," continued the author, a little wearily. He led the way across the hall into the little smoking-room where they could talk freely and undisturbed.

In the smoking-room, the door shut and privacy about them, Pender's attitude changed somewhat, and his manner became very grave. The doctor sat opposite, where he could watch his face. Already, he saw, it looked more haggard. Evidently it cost him much to refer to his trouble at all.

"What I have is, in my belief, a profound spiritual affliction," he began quite bluntly, looking straight into the other's eyes.

"I saw that at once," Dr. Silence said.

"Yes, you saw that, of course; my atmosphere must convey that much to any one with psychic perceptions. Besides which, I feel sure from all I've heard, that you are really a soul-doctor, are you not, more than a healer merely of the body?"

"You think of me too highly," returned the other; "though I prefer

cases, as you know, in which the spirit is disturbed first, the body afterwards."

"I understand, yes. Well, I have experienced a curious disturbance in—not in my physical region primarily. I mean my nerves are all right, and my body is all right. I have no delusions exactly, but my spirit is tortured by a calamitous fear which first came upon me in a strange manner."

John Silence leaned forward a moment and took the speaker's hand and held it in his own for a few brief seconds, closing his eyes as he did so. He was not feeling his pulse, or doing any of the things that doctors ordinarily do; he was merely absorbing into himself the main note of the man's mental condition, so as to get completely his own point of view, and thus be able to treat his case with true sympathy. A very close observer might perhaps have noticed that a slight tremor ran through his frame after he had held the hand for a few seconds.

"Tell me quite frankly, Mr. Pender," he said soothingly, releasing the hand, and with deep attention in his manner, "tell me all the steps that led to the beginning of this invasion. I mean tell me what the particular drug was, and why you took it, and how it affected you—"

"Then you know it began with a drug!" cried the author, with undisguised astonishment.

"I only know from what I observe in you, and in its effect upon myself. You are in a surprising psychical condition. Certain portions of your atmosphere are vibrating at a far greater rate than others. This is the effect of a drug, but of no ordinary drug. Allow me to finish, please. If the higher rate of vibration spreads all over, you will become, of course, permanently cognisant of a much larger world than the one you know normally. If, on the other hand, the rapid portion sinks back to the usual rate, you will lose these occasional increased perceptions you now have."

"You amaze me!" exclaimed the author; "for your words exactly describe what I have been feeling—"

"I mention this only in passing, and to give you confidence before you approach the account of your real affliction," continued the doctor. "All perception, as you know, is the result of vibrations; and clairvoyance simply means becoming sensitive to an increased scale of vibrations. The awakening of the inner senses we hear so much about means no more than that. Your partial clairvoyance is easily explained. The only thing that puzzles me is how you managed to procure the drug, for it is not easy to get in pure form, and no adulterated tincture could

have given you the terrific impetus I see you have acquired. But, please proceed now and tell me your story in your own way.

"This *Cannabis indica*," the author went on, "came into my possession last autumn while my wife was away. I need not explain how I got it, for that has no importance; but it was the genuine fluid extract, and I could not resist the temptation to make an experiment. One of its effects, as you know, is to induce torrential laughter—"

"Yes; sometimes."

"—I am a writer of humorous tales, and I wished to increase my own sense of laughter—to see the ludicrous from an abnormal point of view. I wished to study it a bit, if possible, and—"

"Tell me!"

"I took an experimental dose. I starved for six hours to hasten the effect, locked myself into this room, and gave orders not to be disturbed. Then I swallowed the stuff and waited."

"And the effect?"

"I waited one hour, two, three, four, five hours. Nothing happened. No laughter came, but only a great weariness instead. Nothing in the room or in my thoughts came within a hundred miles of a humorous aspect."

"Always a most uncertain drug," interrupted the doctor. "We make very small use of it on that account."

"At two o'clock in the morning I felt so hungry and tired that I decided to give up the experiment and wait no longer. I drank some milk and went upstairs to bed. I felt flat and disappointed. I fell asleep at once and must have slept for about an hour, when I awoke suddenly with a great noise in my ears. It was the noise of my own laughter! I was simply shaking with merriment. At first I was bewildered and thought I had been laughing in dreams, but a moment later I remembered the drug, and was delighted to think that after all I had got an effect. It had been working all along, only I had miscalculated the time. The only unpleasant thing then was an odd feeling that I had not waked naturally, but had been wakened by someone else—deliberately. This came to me as a certainty in the middle of my noisy laughter and distressed me."

"Any impression who it could have been?" asked the doctor, now listening with close attention to every word, very much on the alert.

Pender hesitated and tried to smile. He brushed his hair from his forehead with a nervous gesture.

"You must tell me all your impressions, even your fancies; they are quite as important as your certainties."

"I had a vague idea that it was someone connected with my forgotten dream, someone who had been at me in my sleep, someone of great strength and great ability—and I was certain too—a woman."

"A good woman?" asked John Silence quietly.

Pender started a little at the question and his sallow face flushed; it seemed to surprise him. But he shook his head quickly with an indefinable look of horror.

"Evil," he answered briefly, "appallingly evil, and yet mingled with the sheer wickedness of it was also a certain perverseness—the perversity of the unbalanced mind."

He hesitated a moment and looked up sharply at his interlocutor. A shade of suspicion showed itself in his eyes.

"No," laughed the doctor, "you need not fear that I'm merely humorizing you, or think you mad. Far from it. Your story interests me exceedingly and you furnish me unconsciously with a number of clues as you tell it. You see, I possess some knowledge of my own as to these psychic byways."

"I was shaking with such violent laughter," continued the narrator, reassured in a moment, "though with no clear idea what was amusing me, that I had the greatest difficulty in getting up for the matches, and was afraid I should frighten the servants overhead with my explosions. When the gas was lit I found the room empty, of course, and the door locked as usual. Then I half dressed and went out on to the landing, my hilarity better under control, and proceeded to go downstairs. I wished to record my sensations. I stuffed a handkerchief into my mouth so as not to scream aloud and communicate my hysterics to the entire household."

"And the presence of this—this?"

"It was hanging about me all the time," said Pender, "but for the moment it seemed to have withdrawn. Probably, too, my laughter killed all other emotions."

"And how long did you take getting downstairs?"

"I was just coming to that. I see you know all my 'symptoms' in advance, as it were; for, of course, I thought I should never get to the bottom. Each step seemed to take five minutes, and crossing the narrow hall at the foot of the stairs—well, I could have sworn it was half an hour's journey had not my watch certified that it was a few seconds. Yet I walked fast and tried to push on. It was no good. I walked apparently without advancing, and at that rate it would have taken me a week to get down Putney Hill."

"An experimental dose radically alters the scale of time and space sometimes—"

"But, when at last I got into my study and lit the gas, the change came horridly, and sudden as a flash of lightning. It was like a douche of icy water, and in the middle of this storm of laughter—"

"Yes; what?" asked the doctor, leaning forward and peering into his eyes.

"—I was overwhelmed with terror," said Pender, lowering his reedy voice at the mere recollection of it.

He paused a moment and mopped his forehead. The scared, hunted look in his eyes now dominated the whole face. Yet, all the time, the corners of his mouth hinted of possible laughter as though the recollection of that merriment still amused him. The combination of fear and laughter in his face was very curious, and lent great conviction to his story; it also lent a bizarre expression of horror to his gestures.

"Terror, was it?" repeated the doctor soothingly.

"Yes, terror; for, though the Thing that woke me seemed to have gone, the memory of it still frightened me, and I collapsed into a chair. Then I locked the door and tried to reason with myself, but the drug made my movements so prolonged that it took me five minutes to reach the door, and another five to get back to the chair again. The laughter, too, kept bubbling up inside me—great wholesome laughter that shook me like gusts of wind—so that even my terror almost made me laugh. Oh, but I may tell you, Dr. Silence, it was altogether vile, that mixture of fear and laughter, altogether vile!"

"Then, all at once, the things in the room again presented their funny side to me and set me off laughing more furiously than ever. The book-case was ludicrous, the arm-chair a perfect clown, the way the clock looked at me on the mantelpiece too comic for words; the arrangement of papers and inkstand on the desk tickled me till I roared and shook and held my sides and the tears streamed down my cheeks. And that footstool! Oh, that absurd footstool!"

He lay back in his chair, laughing to himself and holding up his hands at the thought of it, and at the sight of him Dr. Silence laughed too.

"Go on, please," he said, "I quite understand. I know something myself of the hashish laughter."

The author pulled himself together and resumed, his face growing quickly grave again.

"So, you see, side by side with this extravagant, apparently causeless

merriment there was also an extravagant, apparently causeless terror. The drug produced the laughter, I knew; but what brought in the terror I could not imagine. Everywhere behind the fun lay the fear. It was terror masked by cap and bells; and I became the playground for two opposing emotions, armed and fighting to the death. Gradually, then, the impression grew in me that this fear was caused by the invasion — so you called it just now — of the 'person' who had wakened me: she was utterly evil; inimical to my soul, or at least to all in me that wished for good. There I stood, sweating and trembling, laughing at everything in the room, yet all the while with this white terror mastering my heart. And this creature was putting — putting her — "

He hesitated again, using his handkerchief freely.

"Putting what?"

" — putting ideas into my mind," he went on glancing nervously about the room. "Actually tapping my thought-stream so as to switch off the usual current and inject her own. How mad that sounds! I know it, but it's true. It's the only way I can express it. Moreover, while the operation terrified me, the skill with which it was accomplished filled me afresh with laughter at the clumsiness of men by comparison. Our ignorant, bungling methods of teaching the minds of others, of inculcating ideas, and so on, overwhelmed me with laughter when I understood this superior and diabolical method. Yet my laughter seemed hollow and ghastly, and ideas of evil and tragedy trod close upon the heels of the comic. Oh, doctor, I tell you again, it was unnerving!"

John Silence sat with his head thrust forward to catch every word of the story which the other continued to pour out in nervous, jerky sentences and lowered voice.

"You *saw* nothing — no one — all this time?" he asked.

"Not with my eyes. There was no visual hallucination. But in my mind there began to grow the vivid picture of a woman — large, dark-skinned, with white teeth and masculine features, and one eye — the left — so drooping as to appear almost closed. Oh, such a face — !"

"A face you would recognize again?"

Pender laughed dreadfully.

"I wish I could forget it," he whispered, "I only wish I could forget it!" Then he sat forward in his chair suddenly, and grasped the doctor's hand with an emotional gesture.

"I *must* tell you how grateful I am for your patience and sympathy," he cried, with a tremor in his voice, "and — that you do not think me

mad. I have told no one else a quarter of all this, and the mere freedom of speech—the relief of sharing my affliction with another—has helped me already more than I can possibly say."

Dr. Silence pressed his hand and looked steadily into the frightened eyes. His voice was very gentle when he replied.

"Your case, you know is very singular, but of absorbing interest to me," he said, "for it threatens, not your physical existence, but the temple of your psychical existence—the inner life. Your mind would not be permanently affected here and now, in this world; but in the existence after the body is left behind, you might wake up with your spirit so twisted, so distorted, so befouled, that you would be *spiritually insane*—a far more radical condition than merely being insane here."

There came a strange hush over the room, and between the two men sitting there facing one another.

"Do you really mean—Good Lord!" stammered the author as soon as he could find his tongue.

"What I mean in detail will keep till a little later, and I need only say now that I should not have spoken in this way unless I were quite positive of being able to help your. Oh, there's no doubt as to that, believe me. In the first place, I am very familiar with the workings of this extraordinary drug, this drug which has had the chance effect of opening you up to the forces of another region; and, in the second, I have a firm belief in the reality of super-sensuous occurrences as well as considerable knowledge of psychic processes acquired by long and painful experiment. The rest is, or should be, merely sympathetic treatment and practical application. The hashish has partially opened another world to you by increasing your rate of psychical vibration, and thus rendering you abnormally sensitive. Ancient forces attached to this house have attacked you. For the moment I am only puzzled as to their precise nature; for were they of an ordinary character, I should myself be psychic enough to feel them. Yet I am conscious of feeling nothing as yet. But now, please continue, Mr. Pender, and tell me the rest of your wonderful story; and when you have finished, I will talk about the means of cure."

Pender shifted his chair a little closer to the friendly doctor and then went on in the same nervous voice with his narrative.

"After making some notes of my impressions I finally got upstairs again to bed. It was four o'clock in the morning. I laughed all the way up—at the grotesque banisters, the droll physiognomy of the staircase window, the burlesque grouping of the furniture, and the memory of that outrageous footstool in the room below; but nothing more happen-

ed to alarm or disturb me, and I woke late in the morning after a dreamless sleep, none the worse for my experiment except for a slight headache and a coldness of the extremities due to lowered circulation."

"Fear gone, too?" asked the doctor.

"I seemed to have forgotten it, or at least ascribed it to mere nervousness. Its reality had gone, anyhow for the time, and all that day I wrote and wrote and wrote. My sense of laughter seemed wonderfully quickened and my characters acted without effort out of the heart of true humor. I was exceedingly pleased with this result of my experiment. But when the stenographer had taken her departure and I came to read over the pages she had typed out, I recalled her sudden glances of surprise and the odd way she had looked up at me while I was dictating. I was amazed at what I read and could hardly believe I had uttered it."

"And why?"

"It was so distorted. The words, were mine so far as I could remember, but the meanings seemed strange. It frightened me. The sense was so altered. At the very places where my characters were intended to tickle the ribs, only curious emotions of sinister amusement resulted. Dreadful innuendoes had managed to creep into the phrases. There was laughter of a kind, but it was bizarre, horrible, distressing; and my attempt at analysis only increased my dismay. The story, as it read then, made me shudder, for by virtue of these slight changes it had come somehow to hold the soul of horror, of horror disguised as merriment. The framework of humor was there, if you understand me, but the characters had turned sinister, and their laughter was evil."

"Can you show me this writing?"

The author shook his head.

"I destroyed it," he whispered. "But in the end, though of course much perturbed about it, I persuaded myself that it was due to some after-effect of the drug, a sort of reaction that gave a twist to my mind and made me read macabre interpretations into words and situations that did not properly hold them."

"And, meanwhile, did the presence of this person leave you?"

"No; that stayed more or less. When my mind was actively employed I forgot it, but when idle, dreaming, or doing nothing in particular, there she was beside me, influencing my mind horribly —"

"In what way, precisely?" interrupted the doctor.

"Evil, scheming thoughts came to me, visions of crime, hateful pictures of wickedness, and the kind of bad imagination that so far has been foreign, indeed impossible, to my normal nature —"

"The pressure of the Dark Powers upon the personality," murmured the doctor, making a quick note.

"Eh? I didn't quite catch—"

"Pray, go on. I am merely making notes; you shall know their purport fully later."

"Even when my wife returned I was still aware of this Presence in the house; it associated itself with my inner personality in most intimate fashion; and outwardly I always felt oddly constrained to be polite and respectful towards it—to open doors, provide chairs and hold myself carefully deferential when it was about. It became very compelling at last, and, if I failed in any little particular, I seemed to know that it pursued me about the house, from one room to another haunting my very soul in its inmost abode. It certainly came before my wife so far as my attentions were concerned.

"But, let me first finish the story of my experimental dose, for I took it again the third night, and underwent a very similar experience, delayed like the first in coming, and then carrying me off my feet when it did come with a rush of this false demon-laughter. This time, however, there was a reversal of the changed scale of space and time; it shortened instead of lengthened, so that I dressed and got downstairs in about twenty seconds, and the couple of hours I stayed and worked in the study passed literally like a period of ten minutes."

"That is often true of an overdose," interjected the doctor, "and you may go a mile in a few minutes, or a few yards in a quarter of an hour. It is quite incomprehensible to those who have never experienced it, and is a curious proof that time and space are merely forms of thought."

"This time," Pender went on, talking more and more rapidly in his excitement, "another extraordinary effect came to me, and I experienced a curious changing of the senses, so that I perceived external things through one large main sense-channel instead of through the five divisions known as sight, smell, touch, and so forth. You will, I know, understand me when I tell you that I *heard* sights and *saw* sounds. No language can make this comprehensible, of course, and I can only say, for instance, that the striking of the clock I saw as a visible picture in the air before me. I saw the sounds of the tinkling bell. And in precisely the same way I heard the colors in the room, especially the colors of those books in the shelf behind you. Those red bindings next to them made a shrill, piercing note not unlike the chattering of starlings. That brown bookcase muttered, and those green curtains opposite kept up a constant sort of rippling sound like the lower notes of a wood-horn. But I only was conscious of these sounds when I looked steadily at the different objects, and

thought about them. The room, you understand, was not full of a chorus of notes; but when I concentrated my mind upon a color, I heard, as well as saw, it."

"That is a known, though rarely-obtained, effect of *Cannabis indica*," observed the doctor. "And it provoked laughter again, did it?"

"Only the muttering of the cupboard-bookcase made me laugh. It was so like a great animal trying to get itself noticed, and made me think of a performing bear — which is full of a kind of pathetic humor, you know. But this mingling of the senses produced no confusion in my brain. On the contrary, I was unusually clear-headed and experienced an intensification of consciousness, and felt marvellously alive and keen-minded.

"Moreover, when I took up a pencil in obedience to an impulse to sketch — a talent not normally mine — I found that I could draw nothing but heads, nothing, but one head — always the same — the head of a dark-skinned woman, with huge and terrible features and a very drooping left eye; and so well drawn, too, that I was amazed, as you may imagine —"

"And the expression of the face — ?"

Pender hesitated a moment for words, casting about with his hands in the air and hunching his shoulders. A perceptible shudder ran over him.

"What I can only describe as — blackness," he replied in a low tone; "the face of a dark and evil soul."

"You destroyed that, too?" queried the doctor sharply.

"No; I have kept the drawings," he said, with a laugh, and rose to get them from a drawer in the writing-desk behind him.

"Here is all that remains of the pictures, you see," he added, pushing a number of loose sheets under the doctor's eyes; "nothing but a few scrawly lines. That's all I found the next morning. I had really drawn no heads at all — nothing but those lines and blots and wriggles. The pictures were entirely subjective, and existed only in my mind which constructed them out of a few wild strokes of the pen. Like the altered scale of space and time it was a complete delusion. These all passed, of course, with the passing of the drug's effects. But the other thing did not pass. I mean, the presence of that Dark Soul remained with me. It is here still. It is real. I don't know how I can escape from it."

"It is attached to the house, not to you personally. You must leave the house."

"Yes. Only I cannot afford to leave the house, for my work is my sole means of support, and — well, you see, since this change I cannot even write. They are horrible, these mirthless tales I now write, with their mockery of laughter, their diabolical suggestion. Horrible! I shall go mad if this continues."

He screwed his face up and looked about the room as though he expected to see some haunting shape.

"The influence in this house, induced by my experiment, has killed in a flash, in a sudden stroke, the sources of my humor, and though I still go on writing funny tales—I have a certain name, you know—my inspiration has dried up, and much of what I write I have to burn—yes, doctor, to burn, before anyone sees it."

"As utterly alien to your own mind and personality?"

"Utterly! As though someone else had written it—"

"Ah!"

"And shocking!" He passed his hand over his eyes a moment and let the breath escape softly through his teeth. "Yet most damnably clever in the consummate way the vile suggestions are insinuated under cover of a kind of high drollery. My stenographer left me, of course—and I've been afraid to take another—"

John Silence got up and began to walk about the room leisurely without speaking; he appeared to be examining the pictures on the wall and reading the names of the books lying about. Presently he paused on the hearthrug, with his back to the fire, and turned to look his patient quietly in the eyes. Pender's face was gray and drawn; the hunted expression dominated it; the long recital had told upon him.

"Thank you, Mr. Pender," he said, a curious glow showing about his fine, quiet face, "thank you for the sincerity and frankness of your account. But I think now there is nothing further I need ask you." He indulged in a long scrutiny of the author's haggard features, drawing purposely the man's eyes to his own and then meeting them with a look of power and confidence calculated to inspire even the feeblest soul with courage. "And to begin with," he added, smiling pleasantly, "let me assure you without delay that you need have no alarm, for you are no more insane or deluded than I myself am—"

Pender heaved a deep sigh and tried to return the smile.

"—and this is simply a case, so far as I can judge at present, of a very singular psychical invasion, and a very sinister one, too, if you perhaps understand what I mean—"

"It's an odd expression; you used it before, you know," said the author wearily, yet eagerly listening to every word of the diagnosis, and deeply touched by the intelligent sympathy which did not at once indicate the lunatic asylum.

"Possibly," returned the other, "and an odd affliction too, you'll allow, yet one not unknown to the nations of antiquity, nor to those

moderns, perhaps, who recognize the freedom of action under certain pathogenic conditions between this world and another."

"And you think," asked Pender hastily, "that it is all primarily due to the *Cannabis*? There is nothing radically amiss with myself—nothing incurable, or—?"

"Due entirely to the overdose," Dr. Silence replied emphatically, "to the drug's direct action upon your psychical being. It rendered you ultra-sensitive and made you respond to an increased rate of vibration. And, let me tell you, Mr. Pender, that your experiment might have had results far more dire. It has brought you into touch with a somewhat singular class of Invisible, but of one, I think, chiefly human in character. You might, however, just as easily have been drawn out of human range altogether, and the results of such a contingency would have been exceedingly terrible. Indeed, you would not now be here to tell the tale. I need not alarm you on that score, but mention it as a warning you will not misunderstand or underrate after what you have been through."

"You look puzzled. You do not quite gather what I am driving at; and it is not to be expected that you should, for you, I suppose are the nominal Christian with the nominal Christian's lofty standard of ethics, and his utter ignorance of spiritual possibilities. Beyond a somewhat childish understanding of 'spiritual wickedness in high places,' you probably have no conception of what is possible once you break down the slender gulf that is mercifully fixed between you and that Outer World. But my studies and training have taken me far outside these orthodox trips, and I have made experiments that I could scarcely speak to you about in language that would be intelligible to you."

He paused a moment to note the breathless interest of Pender's face and manner. Every word he uttered was calculated; he knew exactly the value and effect of the emotions he desired to waken in the heart of the afflicted being before him.

"And from certain knowledge I have gained through various experiences," he continued calmly, "I can diagnose your case as I said before to be one of psychical invasion."

"And the nature of this—er—invasion?" stammered the bewildered writer of humorous tales.

"There is no reason why I should not say at once that I do not yet quite know," replied Dr. Silence. "I may first have to make one or two experiments—"

"On me?" gasped Pender, catching his breath.

"Not exactly," the doctor said, with a grave smile, "but with your

assistance, perhaps. I shall want to test the conditions of the house—to ascertain, if possible, the character of the forces, of this strange personality that has been haunting you—"

"At present you have no idea exactly who—what—why—" asked the other in a wild flurry of interest, dread and amazement.

"I have a very good idea, but no proof rather," returned the doctor. "The effects of the drug in altering the scale of time and space, and merging the senses have nothing primarily to do with the invasion. They come to any one who is fool enough to take an experimental dose. It is the other features of your case that are unusual. You see, you are now in touch with certain violent emotions, desires, purposes, still active in this house, that were produced in the past by some powerful and evil personality that lived here. How long ago, or why they still persist so forcibly, I cannot positively say. But I should judge that they are merely forces acting automatically with the momentum of their terrific original impetus."

"Not directed by a living being, a conscious will you mean?"

"Possibly not—but none the less dangerous on that account, and more difficult to deal with. I cannot explain to you in a few minutes the nature of such things, for you have not made the studies that would enable you to follow me; but I have reason to believe that on the dissolution at death of a human being, its forces may still persist and continue to act in a blind, unconscious fashion. As a rule they speedily dissipate themselves, but in the case of a very powerful personality they may last a long time. And, in some cases—of which I incline to think this is one—these forces may coalesce with certain non-human entities who thus continue their life indefinitely and increase their strength to an unbelievable degree. If the original personality was evil, the beings attracted to the left-over forces will also be evil. In this case, I think there has been an unusual and dreadful aggrandizement of the thoughts and purposes left behind long ago by a woman of consummate wickedness and great personal power of character and intellect. Now, do you begin to see what I am driving at a little?"

Pender stared fixedly at his companion, plain horror showing in his eyes. But he found nothing to say, and the doctor continued:

"In your case, predisposed by the action of the drug, you have experienced the rush of these forces in undiluted strength. They wholly obliterate in you the sense of humor, fancy, imagination—all that makes for cheerfulness and hope. They seek, though perhaps automatically only, to oust your own thoughts and establish themselves in their place. You

are the victim of a psychial invasion. At the same time, you have become clairvoyant in the true sense. You are also a clairvoyant victim."

Pender mopped his face and sighed. He left his chair and went over to the fireplace to warm himself.

"You must think me a quack to talk like this, or a madman," laughed Dr. Silence. "But never mind that. I have come to help you, and I can help you if you will do what I tell you. It is very simple: you must leave this house at once. Oh, never mind the difficulties; we will deal with those together. I can place another house at your disposal, or I would take the lease here off your hands, and later have it pulled down. Your case interests me greatly, and I mean to see you through, so that you have no anxiety, and can drop back into your old groove of work tomorrow! The drug has provided you, and therefore me, with a short-cut to a very interesting experience. I am grateful to you."

The author poked the fire vigorously, emotion rising in him like a tide. He glanced towards the door nervously.

"There is no need to alarm your wife or to tell her the details of our conversation," pursued the other quietly. "Let her know that you will soon be in possession again of your sense of humor and your health, and explain that I am lending you another house for six months. Meanwhile I may have the right to use this house for a night or two for my experiment. Is that understood between us?"

"I can only thank you from the bottom of my heart," stammered Pender, unable to find words to express his gratitude.

Then he hesitated for a moment, searching the doctor's face anxiously.

"And your experiment with the house?" he said, at length.

"Of the simplest character, my dear Mr. Pender. Although I am myself an artificially trained psychic and consequently aware of the presence of discarnate entities as a rule, I have so far felt nothing here at all. This makes me sure that the forces acting here are of an unusual description. What I propose to do is to make an experiment with a view of drawing out this evil, coaxing it from its lair, so to speak, in order that it may *exhaust itself through me* and become dissipated for ever. I have already been inoculated," he added; "I consider myself to be immune."

"Heavens above!" gasped the author, collapsing on to a chair.

"Hell beneath! might be a more appropriate exclamation," the doctor laughed. "But, seriously, Mr. Pender, this is what I propose to do—with your permission."

"Of course, of course," cried the other, "you have my permission and my best wishes for success. I can see no possible objection, but—"

"But what?"

"I pray to Heaven you will not undertake this experiment alone, will you?"

"Oh dear, no; not alone."

"You will take a companion with good nerves, and reliable in case of disaster, won't you?"

"I shall bring two companions," the doctor said.

"Ah, that's better. I feel easier. I am sure you must have among your acquaintances men who—"

"I shall not think of bringing men, Mr. Pender."

The other looked up sharply.

"No, or women either; or children."

"I don't understand. Who will you bring, then?"

"Animals," explained the doctor, unable to prevent a smile at his companion's expression of surprise—"two animals, a cat and a dog."

Pender stared as if his eyes would drop out upon the floor, and then led the way without another word into the adjoining room where his wife was awaiting them for tea.

END OF PART ONE

What is the malignant entity that inhabits Pender's house, and has become attached to him through his expansion of consciousness? Don't miss the concluding chapters of this story, dealing with Dr. Silence's encounter and the terrific struggle that ensues, in our July issue.

Nasturtia

by Col. S. P. Meek

In 1929, Hugo Gernsback lost control of *AMAZING STORIES* as a result of various maneuvers on the part of rivals which suggests skullduggery, but the magazine continued to appear under the nominal aegis of the Receiver in Bankruptcy for HG's Experimenter Publishing Company, though actually edited by T. O'Conor Sloane. Gernsback formed a new publishing company and issued *SCIENCE WONDER STORIES* and *AIR WONDER STORIES*, taking his ace illustrator, Frank R. Paul with him. The June 1929 issue of *AMAZING* was the last to carry a Paul cover for many a year, and the next two issues did not particularly inspire one by their cover artwork. Then, with the September 1929 issue, we were fascinated to see a bright and fantastic painting by a man called Wesso, and this initial cover illustrated the debut of a new author, Captain S. P. Meek, USA., with a story of future warfare called, *The Red Peril*. Captain Meek would appear more or less regularly in all of the regular science fiction magazines of the time, and soon became best known for his series dealing with a super-scientific detective, Dr. Bird. In 1931, when *Harry Bates* brought out the first issue of *STRANGE TALES*, we found that Captain Meek was conversant with a good deal more than science and scientific subjects, for this story *Nasturtia*, his first published venture into the weird field, showed that he knew considerable about esoteric subjects such as reincarnation teaching. Would that he could have appeared in this field more often, but it's good to have the few excursions into the strange that we do.

AS MAJOR BAXTER ENTERED the mess hall, he suddenly paused and stiffened like a setter dog on point. His face grew pale and with a trembling hand he pointed toward the table.

"Those things," he muttered in a low voice, vibrant with anger and yet, I thought, with an undertone of fear. "Those damnable things," he exclaimed again, his breath coming in labored gasps. Suddenly he found his voice.

"Sergeant Corrigan!" he roared.

A perturbed mess sergeant entered the room. Without a word, the major pointed at the table. The sergeant stared for a moment and a frightened look came into his eyes as he faced his superior.

"I—I beg the Major's pardon, sir," he stammered. "The new orderly must have put them on, sir. I'll take them out at once."

"Do so!" said the major, cold anger in his voice. "Throw them out, and if anything of the sort ever happens again, you will be held personally responsible. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," replied the sergeant. He hurried to the table and removed a large bunch of red roses from a vase and took them from the room.

"Pah! This place reeks like a slaughter-pen," cried the major. "Open the windows!"

A lieutenant hastened to open the windows and we assumed our seats. I looked hurriedly around the mess. No one seemed to have paid any attention to the scene, and, as a newcomer, it was not for me to take exception to the actions of the Mess President. The meal proceeded along its usual routine. Several times the major looked anxiously out of the windows at the lowering weather. With dramatic suddenness, the storm broke just as the meal was finished. Heralded by a terrific flash of lightning and a heaven-shaking peal of thunder, the rain came down in a torrent. Again and again the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled and growled. The wind howled like a soul in torment.

Major Baxter fretted for a few moments and then rose, leaving his coffee untouched. He walked to the coat rack and took down his rain-coat and campaign hat.

"Going out to put your flowers to bed, Major?" asked Captain Morgan, the adjutant.

The major smiled. "Yes," he said, "this storm is a little too severe for them."

He went out into the driving rain and I turned to Morgan, who sat on my right, for an explanation.

"Just the Old Man's hobby," he said when I questioned him. "You

haven't seen his garden yet, have you? Well, when you do, be sure to rave over it. It *is* a wonder. He raises only one flower, nasturtiums, but he has the finest in the world. He has a movable roof rigged over them and whenever it storms, he goes out and lowers it. He'll sit there for hours with them."

"If he is so fond of flowers, why did he have those removed from the table?"

"Why, they were roses. He hates roses like poison. I have seen him leave a table at a formal dinner just because roses were used in the decorations. It is a standing order that no roses are allowed in the mess. Have you taken over from Warren yet?"

The talk swung to other subjects and I was content to let the matter of the major's eccentricities drop. The storm continued with almost unabated violence for two hours. At last it passed over, and Major Baxter came in, soaking wet from head to foot and with his raincoat covered with mud. All of the officers had gone and I was alone in the club hall when he entered.

"Did your flowers weather the storm all right, sir?" I asked.

He smiled wanly. "Yes, they're all right now," he said. "You see, they don't mind the rain, but they're always uneasy when there's thunder and lightning."

"You seem to think that they feel and fear like human beings, Major," I remarked.

"Why not?" he asked. "They have sensibilities exactly as you and I. They always droop and are afraid when lightning comes, and they brighten up when I come out to them. Besides, she was always afraid of lightning," he added softly.

I did not reply and he stared silently into the fire. His gaze grew far-away and mystical, the light of inner knowledge shining out from his eyes.

"Who was the 'she' who was always afraid of lightning, Major?" I asked softly.

"Nasturtia," he replied absently, and then suddenly looking up he asked sharply, "What did you say?"

I repeated the question.

"No one," he answered brusquely. "Did I mention a 'she'? I must have been day-dreaming. Well, good night, I'm turning in. I'm chilled to the bone from that rain."

He spoke the truth when he said that he was chilled. He woke in the morning delirious and with a raging fever. The medico called it double-

lobar pneumonia. Whatever it was, it worked quickly, for he died at five that afternoon in 1930, without recovering consciousness. Captain Morgan handed me an order detailing me as Summary Court Officer when he met me at supper that night.

"Your first job will be to inventory and take care of Major Baxter's effects," he said. "He was a bachelor and so far as I know, he hasn't a living relative. In that case his property will have to go to the Adjutant General's office for disposition. You'll find it all in army regulations."

Cursing my luck for drawing such a detail, I went to the suite of rooms in the club which the major had occupied and started my task. Most of his effects were of the type common to bachelor officers, although the books attracted my attention. They were all of an esoteric type and dealt with the occult sciences. After a cursory examination, I turned my attention to a locked chest in the room.

After considerable search I found the key and opened it. It was packed solid with books. I lifted the first one out and examined it. It was a diary, and my heart jumped into my mouth when I saw the last entry was dated the night before. I read it.

"There were roses on the table tonight," he had written, "and I had them removed; but they were sent as a sign. It stormed and I went to her flowers. They were glad to see me and they wrapped their tendrils about me like a caress. In the storm I heard her voice. She told me that I am about through with this body and will soon pass into my next incarnation. Well, I am glad, for I will be relieved of memory for a few days, perhaps for a whole life. I don't have to make the trip again for sixty years and I can die and be born again before then. When will it all end? I have been faithful for twenty-six hundred years. Should that not outweigh the faults of one cycle of life? Lord, have mercy!"

In utter amazement I opened another volume. It was also a diary and it was dated twenty-two years before. Hurriedly I turned out the rest of them and looked. Major Baxter had kept a diary for thirty-five years and every word of it was there. I opened at the start and began reading.

Two days later, when I had finished the last of the diaries, I sat for a long time in thought. He had no living relatives to claim those volumes and I was unwilling for the world of scoffers to pore over them. It was a grave responsibility, but I shouldered it. I burned every word of that record of thirty-five years. Let him carry his secret to the grave.

It is not fair, however, to the few deep thinkers of the world, to rob them of the story. Under the mask of a disguised name, I am going to give it to the world from notes I made while reading. Believe it who will,

it matters not to me and it matters not to him. There are some who will know, and it is for them that I am writing. This is Major Baxter's story:

Even as a child, Baxter had been deeply engrossed by the occult and the esoteric. Such studies were a sin in the religious little community where he was raised and he was forced to pursue them in secret. Where he got his knowledge, he did not reveal, but he had advanced far along the line of secret knowledge before he had grown to manhood. His family was a prominent one and he was appointed to West Point in the flurry that attended the Spanish War. He was carried off his feet by the war fever and didn't protest, even though such a career hardly jibed with his secret studies.

He graduated and was commissioned in 1902. The next four years were spent in routine garrison duties and he delved much deeper into esoteric doctrine. His big chance came four years later when he was assigned to the 15th Infantry, stationed in China. Once there, he gave a minimum of attention to his duties and a maximum to his studies. The next three years were interesting ones, detailing as they did his slow steps up the ladder of knowledge, but it is to an entry in 1909 that I must next give attention. In that year his studies had progressed to such an extent that Lo Pui Hong, his master, pronounced him ready for initiation into the greatest of all mysteries, the vision of the Temple of the Rock.

He secured a leave of absence and with his master, penetrated into the hidden fastnesses of secret China, to places where white men had never gone and where they never will go, save on the same errand on which he went. At the temple he underwent the traditional three days of fasting, five days of suffering and seven days of silence. In the dead of night while he prayed before the Holy of Holies, his vision came. Here I will quote verbatim from the diary.

"For hours I prayed for a revelation. At length the wall before me became cloudy and seemed to melt. I felt a tremendous wrench and suddenly found myself standing beside my unconscious body. I looked at it curiously. A sound of trumpets reached me and I became aware of figures moving before me where the wall had been. A regal procession came into view and I recognized myself riding in the midst of it, clad in sumptuous robes. I knew that I was looking at a former incarnation..

"We arrived at a magnificent temple and the howdah of the leading elephant was opened. A veiled female figure descended and I took her by the hand and let her into the temple. The High priest came to meet me and bowed low.

"'What would the Rajah of Balkh of his servant?' he asked.

"'Thou shalt wed me to the Princess Nasturtia,' I replied, 'for she is the one I have chosen to share my throne. To her I pledge eternal constancy.'

"'It is well,' he replied, 'for only so may you wed the elect one.'

"He intoned the wedding chant and the procession reformed and went to the palace. In the zenana, when all had retired, the princess unveiled. God, what beauty! As she crept into my arms, her eyes shining with love, the scene faded and another took its place.

"A high revel was in progress and it needed no second glance to convince me that I had been drinking heavily. My beloved Princess Nasturtia was seated by my side as the nautch girls whirled before us. Nasturtia looked sad. The reason was that I was not watching her but kept my eyes riveted on one of the dancers, a strikingly handsome girl with a certain feline grace and a bold, lascivious glance. As time passed I drank more and more until at last I seized a cup, and, looking full into the eyes of the dancer, I drained it. Nasturtia, with a look of pain, laid a restraining hand on me but I did not heed her. I shook her off and ordered all to be gone, save the dancer. My princess laid a restraining hand on my shoulder.

"'My lord,' she faltered, 'remember thy oath. Not with impunity may such a one be broken.'

"I shook her hand away. 'Begone! Guards, remove her!' I cried.

"Slowly she disappeared and I caught the voluptuous dancer in my arms. Again the scene faded.

"I stood in the high court of the temple with Nasturtia, the grief of ages in her eyes, standing beside me. My royal raiment was replaced with a beggar's rags. On the carved dais before me sat a man with the face of a god, and I knew him to be the Holy Prince, Siddhartha Gautama.

"'What hast thou to say?' asked the Buddha with compassion and sorrow in his holy eyes.

"'O Lord, I have sinned against the Law and have forsaken the Middle Way and broken my oath,' I replied with a heavy heart. Siddhartha turned to Nasturtia.

"'Cleave you still to him, although he has been false to his oath to thee?' he asked.

"'Yea, O Lord,' she answered; 'through life and death, through merit and sin, I cleave to him who is part of me and with whom I shall tread the long way that lies before us.'

"'Then shall a part of his sin be rested on thy head,' he replied.

"The Buddha then turned to me. 'Hearken now to my words. Sinned thou hast and most grievously, and by so doing thou has retarded thy development for a thousand cycles. Yet, lose not all hope, for as thy sin has been one of inconstancy, by constancy canst thou atone and win back merit. As thou hast sinned through desire, it is my decree that desire shall follow thee throughout the ages until by constancy thou has recovered the merit thou has lost. Women shall love thee and shall offer thee all, and the one with whom thou has sinned shall follow thee and tempt thee throughout all the ages and through all thy lives. Yield to her but once, and another thousand cycles loom before thee.'

"'For thee, Princess Nasturtia, who have taken upon yourself a measure of this man's sin, thee I shall transform into a flower that thou mayst await the fulfilment of time. Yet this I grant to him, that thy likeness he may ever have with him to hold him to his trust. In an inaccessible swamp shalt thou grow and near thee shall grow the other, save during such times as she shall rove the world to tempt him. Once in each thousand moons shall he make a pilgrimage to thy dwelling place and carry pure water for thee. If he shall lapse over the time, the plant will die and thy soul shall join me in Nirvana. Come near that I may transform thee.'

"My princess approached the dais and he touched her with a wand. She faded and turned into a flower, such a flower as had never before been seen upon the earth. Sorrowfully I turned from the temple, and, as I passed, the dancer plucked at my sleeve, but I turned from her and fled.

"Again the vision faded and I was aware of the passing of ages, until again I stood before the great Lord Buddha.

"'Thus far, thou hast done well,' he said, 'but it is time for thy pilgrimage. Go thou and fulfil it!'

"'But where, Great Lord, does she dwell?' I asked.

"The Buddha stretched forth his hand and the temple wall melted into a scene where I saw a little island set in the midst of a great swamp. There a nasturtium grew and near it a rose. Without words, the Buddha made me aware of its location.

"There came another wrench of pain as I returned to the flesh to find myself again in the Temple of the Rock."

Major Baxter applied at once for a transfer back to the United States and since had had been for over three years in China, he obtained it. It took him about a year to make the arrangements he thought necessary and then he resigned his commission. Three months of leave was all

that he could get and he was sure that the trip he planned would take him longer than that. As soon as his resignation was accepted, he sailed with his equipment for Belem, at the mouth of the Amazon. With a gang of Indian paddlers, he started for the interior, headed for the Agua Tribulas, a fabled swamp where the water is never still, deep in the Brazilian jungles.

He made his way up the Amazon to the Rio Xingu and up it to its headwaters without much trouble although he lost a number of men on the great rapids of the Xingu. It was after he had left the river and pressed overland, or rather, overswamp to the vicinity of the Agua Tribulas, that his Indians deserted him to a man. They warned him that the Great Spirit of the Troubled Waters would never allow him to enter the forbidden domain. However, he pressed on, although he was forced to abandon the collapsible canoe which had been carried that far with great labor. He carried nothing with him except a heavy knife and all the fresh water that he could carry. I quote again, this time from an entry made four days after he had left his Indians.

"It is dreadful in the jungle. It is a vast stretch of black, fetid water, covered with a green slime. The stench of decaying vegetation is almost more than I can bear. I have seen no living things save snakes, lizards and a myriad of tormenting insects which turn life into a hell of torment. At night the great vampire bats swing around overhead and I dare not lie down to sleep lest they make the sleep my last one. The leeches have already taken so much blood that I dare not lose more. Today I was forced to swim four times. Strange reptiles rushed at me from time to time, but by some miracle I managed to escape. Luckily I have met with no alligators since I entered the swamp, for in my weakened condition, I don't believe I could fight one. My water is all gone, save one canteen which I am saving for Nasturtia. My lips are parched and my tongue is so swollen that I can hardly close my mouth. On all sides is the putrid water of the swamp but I dare not drink it, for it is full of fever germs which would soon end my journey. How much longer I can stagger on, I don't know, but I will keep my one canteen of water sacred for her. I can do no more than die, and death would be preferable to this suffering, were it not that I would lose her for all eternity. Be merciful, Lord, and let me reach her soon that I may give her this water. Then I will drink of the swamp and die. How long, Lord, how long?"

It was the evening of the next day that he came in sight of the tiny island looming above the swamp. With a feeble croak, he summoned

the last remaining vestiges of his strength and struggled through the slime to reach it, only to find an unscalable, embankment before him. It seemed the end, and he sank down in the mire and sobbed in weariness. A vagrant breeze brought to him a faint odor of flowers and it spurred his lagging courage.

He started around the island and on the further side he found a break in the escarpment. He scrambled up and found himself on the island. High in the center grew a single nasturtium plant, almost dead from lack of water, with withered and yellowing leaves. Near it, blooming and fragrant, grew a rose, thriving on the fetid waters of the swamp which were killing the other plant.

He drew the cork of his canteen and poured the fresh water on the roots of the nasturtium, and then came a miracle. As he watched, the leaves of the plant again grew green and the buds burst into magnificent bloom.

He fell on the ground before it, and the green leaves and tendrils of the nasturtium bent forward and wrapped themselves about his wasted and tortured body. One magnificent orange flower bent over and touched him lightly on the cheek and in his ears rang a gentle, caressing voice.

"Oh, my beloved one," it murmured softly, "I knew thou wouldest come, although the rose taunted me that thou wouldest fail. Look! I have for thee, as I have had each time, a perfect seed. Take it, beloved, for in its flowers my spirit dwelleth ever near thee."

He plucked the seed and then, with his last remaining strength, tore up the rose by the roots and hurled it into the swamp. To his ears came a mocking laugh and the seductive voice of the dancer rang out over the troubled waters.

"I have lost this round, but I have left my mark. Look thou at thy hand! . . ."

Major Baxter was re-commissioned, of course, in 1917. I examined him as he lay in his coffin, the day before his funeral. In the palm of his right hand was a series of old scars and cicatrices, which looked as though they had been deep scratches. In outline, they formed a perfect rose.

The Editor's Page

(continued from page 5)

A number of you have asked for *The Devil's Bride*, by Seabury Quinn, the novel featuring Jules de Grandin. I'd love to oblige you. The difficulty here is that this would require three installments, and they would be long ones—two installments of the original six-part magazine version would be combined each time. If I get two requests from you, to be considered as a motion and a second, then I'll put it up for vote, and a majority of the

responses will either pass or reject. This means 51% or more of the letters or postcards or preference pages received, and a failure to vote on the subject will have to be considered a "no" vote. I'm aware that abstention is not exactly equal to "no"; but in this instance I must be satisfied that a majority of the active readers positively want the story—and only a "yes" vote can effect this.

RAWL

The Reckoning

Despite one vigorous dissent, Kirk Mashburn's story was decidedly well-liked by most of you; and those of you who voted for the Howard poem rated it very highly. The real contention this time was between the stories which wound up in third and fourth and fifth place, and in the last place positions. Ties here were frequent, but all were broken, finally. Here's the finish figures:

(1) *The Last of Placide's Wife*, Kirk Mashburn; (2) *The Years Are As A Knife*, (verse), Robert E. Howard; (3) *The Red Witch*, Nictzin Dyalhis; (4) *The Man From Cincinnati*, Holloway Horn; (5) *The Wind In The Rose-Bush*, Mary Wilkins-Freeman; (6) *The Jewels of Vishnu*, Harriet Bennett; (7) *Ground Afire*, Anna Hunger; (8) *The Last Letter From Norman Underwood*, L. E. Meredith.

The Dark Star

by G.G. Pendarves

Seventeen stories under the name of G. G. PENDARVES ran in *WEIRD TALES* between *The Devil's Graveyard*, in the August 1926 issue, and *The Withered Heart*, published posthumously in the November 1939 issue. It was not until Farnsworth Wright sadly wrote of her passing that we knew this author to have been Gladys Gordon Trenerry. Her stories also appeared in *ORIENTAL STORIES* and *THE MAGIC CARPET*. Most popular of her tales was *The Eighth Green Man*, which saw two reprintings in WT (it appeared first in the March 1928 issue, with a shuddery illustration by Hugh Rankin) and has appeared in various anthologies since. Also repeated in WT were *The Grave at Goonhilly* (originally in the October 1930 issue); *The Sin-Eater* (first published in the December 1938 issue), and *Thing of Darkness* (first seen in the August 1937 issue). Of her nineteen stories in WT, most were memorable, and the question that we wrestled with, when we thought of her stories, was not whether to offer you G. G. Pendarves, but which to start out with!

ALAN CLOVA HID the winged exultant uprush of his emotion with habitual control. His face, thin to emaciation, dark and cleanly chiseled, was aloof and proud as a Pharoah's. It was hard to believe he was only thirty. So much experience, so much hard-earned knowledge, so much resolution and critical cool judgment was in his eyes. Beneath straight black brows they gleamed, steady, brilliant and serene. Here was a man of action no less than a man of intellect. Breeding, dignity, pride of race had molded the features, but they were instinct with a tense fighting awareness that was the New World's gift to the Old.

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His cousin, David Wishart Clova, Earl of Glenhallion, narrowly observed his young kinsman. Hope stirred in him once more; hope he had thought was dead—dead and buried with his three sons beneath the sodden earth of Flanders. The words of the creed he had so often repeated in the little gray chapel on his estate, beat in his brain like the portentous opening bars of a tremendous symphony. *"I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come."* The words had never passed his lips since 1916, when his third and youngest son fell—1916, twenty years now.

Now, looking at Alan's six feet five inches of brawn and muscle, the beliefs he had forsaken flashed up again. Here in the flesh once more was an heir to the great name, the centuries of tradition, the wild splendor of Glenhallion estates. Here, under the roof of Gorm Castle, stood a man who might well have been one of his own sons grown older, stronger, more mature. Resurrection! . . . Yes, it seemed a resurrection indeed.

Alan stood at a great window looking out over Glenhallion estate, from walled grounds about the castle to meadow, forest, craggy hills, and far-distant sky whose April blue darkened to hazy grays and purples above the Kaims of Vorangowl. His absorbed gaze traveled from point to point, then came back to rest on a square gray tower within the grounds, ivy-hung and partly obscured by beechtrees. He frowned at sight of a man who was pacing round its battlements. His appearance, a great hulking figure in outlandish-looking gray clothes, stirred a sudden cold antipathy in Alan and he turned abruptly back to the room and its two occupants.

Lady Maisry, the Earl's only surviving child, sat by a log fire. She had a fragile look and shivered now and then at sound of the wind's bluster round the castle of Gorm. She looked, Alan thought, with her golden hair and green sheath dress, as if she had been transplanted from the daffodil-beds in the grounds below.

Some unfathomable instinct of protection for her made him hesitate to speak of the man on the tower roof. He strolled back to the window. Yes, the man was there still, pacing to and fro, to and fro, a long cloak flapping in the wind, hair and beard flaming red in the evening light. Such a fury of rage shook Alan that it was a minute before he could command his voice. Then he asked, "Is that old tower a complete ruin? Or, do—do people live in it?"

Earl Glenhallion came over to the window. "Birds, bats, spiders! That's all you'll find living in the old Keep. Fine old stronghold, all that's left of the original castle; the rest was burned down about two hun-

dred years ago. No, you'd not find man, woman, or child who'd go inside that tower for five minutes."

"I'm going."

Alan's remark had the effect of a pistol-shot on Lady Maisry. She got to her feet and moved quickly across to him, put a pleading hand on his arm.

"No—no—no! You mustn't! It's dangerous, very dangerous. There's something . . . there's someone . . . you never know if—it skips some generations! My father thinks it all nonsense, but . . .

Alan almost promised never to set foot in the tower if it worried her. The distress in her gray eyes, the frightened pallor of her cheeks shook him. She interested and gripped his imagination profoundly. Yesterday's first impressions of her were strengthened by today's. Her clear ivory-pale skin, wide gray eyes, gold thick shining hair, gentle slow ease of every movement, and above all to his critical sensitive ear, her low deliberate exquisite voice, immensely charmed him. Beyond these things; though, rare as he had found such physical perfection, he was deeply aware of a mind fully as alive and equipped as his own, of a nature as exacting, and a will as inflexible. But there was something about her that puzzled him; he had the impression of a deeply hidden preoccupation which she dreaded might be discovered.

"She looks as substantial as a dragonfly, but I believe she's made of steel covered with white velvet," he reflected. "I know that fragile-looking type of thoroughbred. She'd live through famine and earthquake—if she felt like living! I know horses and I know dogs, and that gives me a line on humans. She's letting go for some reason, and I'm going to know that reason."

All the same he found it difficult to remember she wouldn't die easily as he met her panic-stricken eyes. A grim thought struck him. Was that man on the battlements her lover?—was she hiding him there from the Earl?

"Why do you feel like that about the tower?" he asked.

Her father drew her to him, an arm about her shoulders. "She's had a queer life here in this old castle. You must forgive her fancies, Alan! The legend about that old Keep dies hard. Everyone on the estate swears by it. Maisry believes it, too."

"Just what is the legend?"

"A-a-ah! Hrumph!" The older man stalked over to the window and glowered at the gray Keep. "They say it's haunted by an ancestor of ours, who lived some two hundred years ago. He was known as the Red

Earl of Glenhallion, or Red Alastair, because of his flaming red beard."

Alan felt his heart jump as if a mine had exploded under the polished flooring under foot. He tried to keep his glance from the old tower, and failed. He must look again; perhaps the setting sun had dazzled him, given a false illusion. He joined the Earl; his keen gazed followed the other's look.

A clear shaft of light struck across the glen from over the high moorland of Vorangowl and picked out the tower like a searchlight; every ivy-leaf stood out like carved metal, every irregularity of weathered stone showed up, discolorations of dripping rain from the roof, the gold patina of lichen, the rusty brown of winter leaves lodged in iron-barred windows — all was mercilessly clear.

And, on the breast-high battlemented wall that ran round the roof, a man leaned with face directly turned to Alan and the castle window at which he stood. The man's hair and beard flamed red as torchlight.

"The story of Red Alastair does us no credit," went on the Earl. "He was a wild, dissolute, savage man, from all the records. You can read him up in the library if you're interested. But as to haunting the Keep — that's nonsense, the talk of ignorant peasants, the sort of story that people like to invent about any old ruin."

"So no one lives there, no one climbs up to the roof to look round, not for any reason?" Alan's voice was harsh.

"No one. It stands there as you see it now — deserted! I've been up, of course. Jamie has the key — the only key. When I succeeded to Glenhallion there were constant scandals and wild tales because visitors were allowed to go over the Keep and explore it. I locked up the place, and since then there've been no more tales of ghosts and people being pushed off battlements or crushed behind doors and all the rest of it. I've not been inside for a year or more, and certainly no one else has. A good specimen of Tenth Century architecture it is, and that's all. If you see Red Alastair when you go over it, let me know. I rule here now; he's had his turn and made a very bad job of it, by all accounts."

The two men turned back to the fire, the Earl chuckling, Alan feeling more angry, more stupidly bewildered than he'd ever felt in his whole vigorous sane existence. He believed in ghosts no more than he believed in the Divine Right of kings; and he connected both beliefs with forgotten centuries when people had no bathrooms, enjoyed heretic burnings in place of cinemas and nightclubs, and fought for "the Glory of God" or some other such unpractical cause.

He thrust the whole thing out of his mind for future cogitation. Maisry

was watching him with painful anxiety, as if she divined his inner discomfort. He was determined to share it with no one, and made up his mind to investigate the Keep before he slept that night.

In order to get the legend as it was bandied about the countryside before reading up a literary account, he tried to extract information from the close-mouthed Jamie, who valetted him as he dressed for dinner. Jamie shied away from the subject like a nervous horse from a white flapping sheet.

"It's not good to talk of *him*, not about this time of year, my lord." The man spoke the broad Scots of the countryside, and became almost unintelligible as his agitation and embarrassment increased.

Alan turned to the big swinging mirror on his dressing-table, pretending to examine his chin. He saw the reflected Jamie glance over his shoulder.

"Why at this time of year, especially?"

"Eh, my lord?—you that'll be next Earl of Glenhallion to be asking that!"

The thin dark face turned from the mirror with a smile, so pleasant and friendly a smile that the old servant relaxed to it with: "It's not you I'll be blaming, my lord; it's those that brought you up so far from your own land and kinsmen. You that were born to all this!"

"But I wasn't! When I was born, exactly seven other heirs came before me."

"It's the Earl will be telling you all the family history, him and her Ladyship. It's not for me to be havering of the gentry."

"Tell me at least why April's a bad time to discuss Red Alastair? Must a ghost be in season like grouse or blackcock?"

"Wheest, wheest for pity's sake, my lord! You can't tell what's abroad these evenings. The master hasn't 'the sight'; he could go up into the Keep this very night and not see a thing to fright him. But there's others can—aye, there's others can see! And I tell you this, my lord: the Dark Star is up over the Kaims of Vorangowl again."

"You mean the high moors at the head of the glen?"

"No. Not the moors you've seen. The star's in the Picture, the cursed thing *he* left in the Keep. Aye, the Picture I'm meaning of the moors and the cliff where the bride he stole from another man jumped to her death."

A deep sonorous booming distracted Jamie from his confidences.

"That's the dinner gong, my lord. I'll not weary you with my tales

now. It's all writ in black and white, and every word's true, for all the master's fleering at the legend."

When he made his way down to the lofty, shadow-filled dining-hall, exasperation had rubbed Alan's temper rather raw.

"Am I crazy—or am I crazy?" he demanded of himself, one hand lightly sliding over the broad baluster-rail for the sensuous pleasure of touching the lovely seasoned wood, undesecrated by varnish, worn by time. His reason was floundering and plunging in heavy seas of unfamiliar and unpalatable sensations, ideas and thoughts.

"And, so far, there's nothing in the facts to justify my going up in the air like this," he complained to himself. "Even if I did see—and most certainly I did—a red-bearded man, what of it? They exist—especially here in Scotland; it's almost the hallmark of a Scot. Maybe porridge produces red beards! Jamie's daft about his old legend. Now there's a picture to reckon with, and a dark star, and a lady friend of Red Alastair's! Can you beat it? Even a Hollywood director couldn't think up this one. But the man—the man on the tower . . . "

A fighting look came into his dark eyes. "Revolting sight! Don't quite know why—but somehow—filthy! Reminded me of that fat one in Paris, sitting like a blotchy swollen spider in his den, waiting for his doped girls to be brought along—bah! I'll get Red Beard! Hunt the hairy brute right off the map."

Dinner rather took his mind off his troubles. There were guests he liked. One, an M. P. for one of the Border counties, met him more than halfway on the question of road development. Over some fine old brandy from the cellars of Gorm, the two men built bridges and tunnels and roads over Scotland; opened up Northern China; decided on the best type of car for use in desert country; and were passionately reclaiming, for Holland, vast new tracts of submerged country when their host brought them back to social duties of the moment.

Alan, however, was himself again, perfectly confident of being able to deal with life and its problems in his rational systematic way. The old tower and the man on its battlements no longer seemed ominous.

"Liver, I suppose," he told himself. "Never knew I had one before, though. I'll satisfy myself that beggar's not about before I go to bed, though. Might set fire to the trees with his flaming red beard."

In the big drawing-room, where lamps and fires made shadows dance on molded ceilings and white-paneled walls, on the faded coral of brocaded curtains that shut out sky and stars and wind-torn clouds, the Lady Maisry sang to them; of love, of death, of ecstasy, of bitter longing—

ballads of olden times. She sang with the last perfect simplicity of a genuine artist; and with smiles, with tears, the listeners paid tribute to her gift.

As the last note echoed in the quiet, spell bound room, Alan knew! He knew he was in love, exquisitely, irrevocably, passionately.

A few hours later, when the guests were gone and the old Earl sleeping in his room, he and Maisry sat and talked together. Her low, shaken voice confided in him the horror that had thrust itself into her life, and he listened with a mounting love and pity and fear for her that carried him like a tidal wave far, far beyond every intellectual boundary his mind had ever recognized.

He wanted to think that she was ill, that her nerves were playing tricks, that the old castle of Gorm with its memories and legends had worked on her, that change of scene would cure her, that she must marry him and come away and live and laugh in the sun and forget. His sane logical mind clamored for such solution of her secret. But below the rational protests of his disciplined clear mind, deeper understanding stirred and apprehended.

The woman he loved looked at him; her haunted eyes besought him. He must make a decision. Now!

He got to his feet, bent down and drew her up beside him, her hands in his strong clasp. He did not kiss her—no, not even the slim, cold hands that trembled in his own. But in the silence his very soul spoke to her, gave lasting deep assurance of his passion.

"I believe you," he said at last. "Every word you've told me. And I'm going to follow this up. It had never occurred to me that things like—like Red Alastair and his Picture could exist. You've convinced me."

"But Alan! Alan!" her low voice broke in fear. "I've told you only because your love for me gives you a right to know my secret, because I want you to see how useless it is to love me. It is hopeless, most dangerous to interfere. This is my fate. All these years, these centuries, he has waited, growing stronger. Perhaps, at first, he might have been sent back—back to his own place. Now it's too late. He's learned the trick of leaving his awful painted moorland and getting into our world."

She shivered at the fierce fighting light of battle her words brought to the dark eyes looking down into her own.

"Alan! It is fatal—quite fatal to oppose him. You must never put foot inside the Keep. Oh, can't you see, have I not explained it all? It is hopeless. I told my secret to prevent your interfering, running into hideous peril. To stop you going, Alan! Not you—not you . . . "

His grip of her hands slackened. He stooped; his eyes sought hers in sudden overwhelming wonder.

"D'you mean that you—that you care, too? Maisry! Maisry! If you do, nothing can separate us. No dream or ghost! Now I know the facts. I am prepared. You have armed me against surprize. I'm ready for Red Alastair. Do you think—do you think I'd let man or devil take you from me—now?"

2

ONE. TWO. THREE.

The strokes tolled out from a church-tower of some nearby village as Alan left the castle and made his way to the old gray Keep. The chimes brought a flash of self-mockery into his face.

"If the old crowd at home could see me now—trotting off in the moonlight at three a. m. to meet a fellow who died two hundred years ago! Mack's waistcoat buttons would shoot clear across Lake Huron with the laugh he'd get out of it!"

The wild clear sky, glittering stars and stinging wind were beginning to put a different complexion on the past few hours at 'Gorm—vast shadow-filled firelit romantic old castle that it was. Here, striding across the turf, trees tossing and creaking, clouds driving, the shrill mad pipe of the wind in his ears, Alan's body exulted in the challenge to his senses; his physical rather than psychical powers were called upon.

It was extraordinarily difficult for a man of his type to sustain the vision that Maisry's story had called up. With every step, old habits of reasoning took hold more firmly. When he reached the huge, barred, iron-studded door of the Keep he had once more put the Red Alastair legend into the realm of fantasy. He wondered at himself for accepting it at Maisry's valuation even for an hour. He recalled a bit of doggerel he'd chanced on that day, or, rather, the previous day:

*Love, love, love love,
Love it is a dizziness!
It winna let a puir body
Gang aboot his bizziness!*

"And that explains me to myself." He fitted a big oiled key into the lock and gave a half-shamed laugh at this own expense. "What odds, though! If Maisry wants me to make a fool of myself in this particular

way—I'm for it. Anyhow, I intended to see the ugly, hairy beggar off the premises. Might as well take a look at the Picture too, while I'm here. There aren't many back home can beat me at sightseeing, I'll say!"

He confided these conclusions to the inner side of the door as he closed and locked it behind him, in order to trap any vagrant lurking inside the tower. He switched on his torch, a large, powerful one with a new battery, and began his strangely timed visit.

"Better check up on the plan again."

He patted the wide pockets of his overcoat, drew out a folded piece of semi-transparent tough paper familiar to architects, opened out the worn crackling sheet and examined once more the scale-drawing and faded cramped letter press.

"H-m-m ! Ground floor. This was where soldiers were lodged."

He forced back a narrow door on its rusted creaking hinges and went in. Silence and darkness. The nine-foot thick walls were cut to north and south exposures, forming huge window-seats, broad and cold as tombstones. The windows were small, narrow, and heavily barred by iron grilles as thick as a man's wrist. A yawning fireplace like a roofless cupboard showed stained and blackened floor and a pair of massive iron dogs.

He stood on the hearth and peered up. A vast chimney gaped to the sky; he could see a pale moon with torn rags of cloud across her face.

Sound of a shuffling, heavy footstep somewhere above took him to the foot of the stairway; he craned his head to listen. The spiral stairs were steep and a bare two feet in breadth; his shoulders rubbed the outer wall as he climbed. He reached the next level and flashed his torch into the thick, absorbent darkness of another hollow room. The door of it stood wide. He moved cautiously across the threshold; the brilliant spotlight of his torch showed no one there.

This was the dining-hall and a higher ceiling, more windows, a smoother flooring, and less rough-hewn fireplace distinguished it from the room below. Above the hearth, with its hollowed, blackened stones and battered mantelpiece, a startling vivid thing brought Alan's travelling torch to an abrupt halt.

"For heaven's sake ! Is that the Picture ?"

His dark lean face regarded it with a positive glare of incredulous belief—unwilling furious belief.

"Land of Moses ! Just a fake ! It's as new as—as the Chrysler Building ! The paint's as fresh as a ship's just out of drydock."

In the shock of discovery, he forgot the footsteps. He strode across the dusty floor, trained his torch full on the painted scene.

"Damn—and damn—and damn again!" he glowered, swearing in soft whispered fury, eyes narrowed under black impatient brows. "Maisry was dead right about its infernal technique. It's more like Vorangowl than it's like itself. It's damnable!"

It was. The thing confronted him, exquisitely improbable, perfect beyond human hand or brain to conceive and execute. Some six feet square of the rough wall that formed the chimney-breast had been smoothed down and prepared to a surface even and fine as asphalt. Far-reaching miles of country were compressed within that six-foot bit of wall, the whole of Glenhallion estates from castle grounds to the Kaims of Vorangowl—high brooding, eagle-haunted plateau of moor and rock and fir-woods that was the western limit. It was the view that stretched before the windows of the library at Gorm castle where he had watched yesterday's sun go down behind the same craggy ridge of rock portrayed on the painted horizon before him; the view he'd been watching before his eyes dropped to the Keep and that abominable tramp that lounged there on its battlements.

Stranger, newcomer he might be, but he knew that view very thoroughly indeed, and his trained, falcon-keen eye recognized and acknowledged the astounding reproduction of one landmark after another.

"It's like looking through a window at the thing. If it weren't three a. m. and this wall facing due east instead of west, I'd take my oath that I was staring through a sheet of plate-glass at Vorangowl itself as it looked yesterday about five o'clock! The same effect to the last detail—the same feathery cloud-shape over the pointed hill—and blue haze over the patch of wood to the north. It's not just an April evening, it's the identical evening I watched yesterday."

He started, frowned, looked more intently at the Picture on the wall.

"This cursed torch . . . if it were only daylight! The infernal thing—why—it looks like mist rolling up over the road—actually rolling up before my eyes!"

And then his whole mind and body, every faculty and sense were suddenly sharpened to amazing perception. His breath came in deep sighs as though he were toiling up-hill with a weight to carry; his face hollowed and lost color; sweat stood in great beads on his forehead.

The faint far-off figure of a man on the painted road—a stony track flung down across the heights—was coming nearer, nearer, nearer. . . .

A figure that had been a vague shadow in the mist, when Alan first looked at the Picture, whose minuteness had served to emphasize the deserted aching loneliness of the moors. Now, the figure was moving forward, swiftly, swiftly over the stony endless road—past miles of dark woods, down the steep drop to the glen until it was swallowed up in the trees and shrubberies of Gorm which formed the foreground of the Picture.

A corner of the Keep itself showed in this same foreground, a bit of the gray weathered battlements.

Alan stared, waiting with pulses beating heavy and slow, watching for the man to reappear. Abruptly he came. He was there on the battlemented roof of the Keep, his great red head and fiery beard sharply defined. He turned to look at Alan, flung up a great arm in menace or derisive greeting.

In that instant a sound of high hooting wind filled the Keep, shrieked through the barred windows, roared down the hollow shaft of the stairway. Alan whipped about, torch in hand, to see the door slam in his face. The wind dropped as he flung himself forward to pull and tug with mad violence at the clumsy ring of iron that formed a handle. As he vainly struggled, there was a sound of heavy footsteps coming from above, halting outside his door, moving on downward and out of hearing.

Silence, heavy and sightless as a grave's, closed down on the Keep and its prisoner.

The shock of it roused Alan like a blow in the face. He'd stood bemused, dreaming, hypnotized by a bit of painted wall and let himself be trapped. Tricked! Some bit of ancient conjuring, some ingenious contraption in the chimney-flue had caused the illusion.

And the uproar of the wild and sudden wind? He shrugged that problem off. Whoever worked the Picture fake could take care of that too!

He flashed his light up the chimney but could see nothing beyond bare, grimed old stones rising in rough crumbling perpendicular. He examined the rooms opening off the dining-hall; they were merely cells, unlighted, full of dust and rubble. He returned to the main room and looked up at the windows with careful, calculating eye; they were narrow, strongly barred, set high on the walls so that no arrow, glancing through, should strike a human target. No faintest hope from them, even could he climb like a fly or were possessed of the sharpest of files. Only an explosive could burst open his prison bars.

And now that cursed red-bearded man was at large while he was trapped and helpless here. What was the game? Robbery—the old plate at

Gorm? Or jewels—would the beast go near Maisry, frighten her, hurt her? What had he plotted and planned as he hid here all those hours?

Not even hidden, though, Alan reflected. The creature had brazened it out on the battlements in full light. How was it no one but himself had seen? The Earl had been standing beside him when . . . Hastily averting his mind's eye from the thought that leaped out of ambush to answer his question, Alan said aloud in clearest, concisest tones:

"That's an easy one! The old man's sight is failing!" and this in spite of knowing that only twelve months ago the Earl had once more carried off the Fofarshire trophy for target shooting at the annual sports. "And, after all, it's not likely that people who live here go poking about and staring as I've been doing. It's *perfectly* simple that I happened to be the only one to see that infernal tramp."

Other explanations buzzed in his brain and he beat them back like a cloud of noisome flies. There was no other explanation.

Maisry's words sounded in his memory. "Only some have *the sight*. Father hasn't got it, and that's why he's never seen Red Alastair and doesn't believe in the legend—but it's fact and no legend at all. I have *the sight*. And you have it too, Alan. I knew at once; I always recognize this wonderful, this terrible power in anyone else. You will see Red Alastair—most certainly you will see him—and that is why I can explain to you about his Picture that he lives in."

For some minutes Alan closed his eyes, recalled deliberately scenes and images and places he had left behind in America. He wanted to shake off illusion, to steady his swirling thoughts, to forget the dark disturbance that swelled and rose and battered at his sanity.

He thought of a holiday he had spent loafing in the sun and warm salt water in Florida. He remembered a day in the woods near a logging-camp when an angry she-bear had chased him as he made off with her cub. He saw himself rocking and smoking and yarning on the broad screened porches of his aunt's country-house in the White Mountains; flashed through the hours of last Christmas day, spent with old Friedland in New York . . . the fires and friends and brilliant dinner-table . . .

He opened his eyes on the Picture, and had the sensation of dropping from heaven to hell. On the road—returning, retreating to the misty Kaims of Vorangowl—the man was back again. But this time, and Alan watched with all his soul although he denied the thing he watched, a faint shadowy second figure followed after the man. Beyond a rocky cliff-face far up on the Kaims the red-haired figure halted, turned

about to beckon the weary shadow that toiled after him, a shadow that grew clearer with every step it took. Suddenly Alan knew it.

"Maisry! Maisry! Maisry! Come back — come back to me!"

His full-throated anguished cry beat and echoed against the high cold walls of his prison. Again, again he called. He must bring her back, he *must*, before she set foot on that high narrow trail skirting the precipice.

That meant death to her, lasting, damnable, eternal death. He was conscious of a single overwhelming passion of determination to bring her back — back from the cliff-face where she would slip to darkness, where he would lose her in this world and the next.

With a new shock, he recognized that his will was locked with the will of the red-haired man who waited for Maisry beyond the cliff path. The Picture darkened. Mist rolled gray and baffling down from the heights, and in the leaden skies a dark star shone, a star of evil copper-red that changed the green woods and April grass to somber purples.

Old Jamie's warning darted across his memory: "The Dark Star is up over the Kaims of Vorangowl."

He saw Maisry move forward, saw Red Alastair beckon with insistent hand. Deathless love. Deathless hate. The twin fires leaped up, all his conscious being focused to a single point — to conquer Red Alastair.

He knew his antagonist, acknowledged him at last. He knew his own weapon too. His only weapon. The Will. A clean strong sword that all hell tried to tear from his grasp.

And now Maisry was coming back, back to him from the dark cliff, from engulfing mists, from Red Alastair, slowly, moving wraith-like past wood and glen and through the enfolding trees in the grounds at last. As she vanished, she turned to smile at him.

His torch fell from his nerveless hand. He sagged to the ground, huddled with head on knees; he felt old and worn and done. His next recollection was of light at the windows. Dawn, and the high sweet note of skylarks on the wing.

And the Picture showed a fresh and verdant April evening, an empty road wound up over far-distant heights, a clear tender sky shone above all. It was a magic tender exquisite study of a northern spring. Alan looked and experienced emotions he had never dreamed of possessing.

"And that was her dream! That child caught — held — dragged to hell!"

"Maisry!" he addressed the Picture as if she were still on the road before his eyes. "Forgive me. My faithlessness, my stupidity. You shall never tread that road again. It is my fight now. It is between me and Red Alastair. *And — I — will — win.*"

The last words fell with slow, deadly emphasis, a vow abruptly extinguished, the echo of the last word torn from his lips by an inferno of wind. The Keep rocked in its fury, vibrating ominously to its high tremendous shriek.

He turned to the door, prepared for assault, and was faced by a new shock of surprize. The door stood wide open. Cool morning air, bearing a tang of pine and freshness of young wet leaves and grass, met him as he ran to the lower floor, to find the outer door unlocked and opened to the misty morning.

Soberly, slowly, thinkfully he returned to Gorm, deeply aware that the Keep was solitary now; no need to search. Its demon was not there. For the moment there was no enemy, no battlefield.

There was only Maisry, and he must go to her.

3

"AND MAISRY?" ALAN LOOKED AT the breakfast table laid for two and his eyes lost their eagerness. "Not joining us, Cousin David?"

"No. Her maid says she had a bad night. I don't know what to make of it; these last weeks she's altered beyond recognition. I've tried to persuade her to go away for a change. Our local man, Doctor Shields, says she's well enough but makes no effort; he thinks there's something on her mind."

Alan regarded the fish on his plate with a stern frown. He'd been doing some hard, intensive thinking and saw a gleam of light on the very dark horizon of his thoughts.

"I met a chap on the ship coming over. Lives in Stirling. Several people on board knew him well. Seems he's made a great reputation as a nerve specialist. Broome, Eliot Broome's his name."

The Earl's unhappy face lightened.

"Ah, that's a household word in Scotland, and in other countries too. A nerve-man, yes! I didn't think of him for Maisry. D'you suppose she . . ."

"It's hard to do anything but guess. This fellow Broome impressed me more than anyone I've met in years. Got to know him fairly well—y'know how it is on board ship. We yarnd several nights away together. Made a good team for discussions, as he always took a diametrically opposite viewpoint from mine. I'm for fact, the proven fact."

His voice weakened as he proclaimed his lifelong standard. How

foolishly short it fell of measuring up with last night's phenomenon!

"Maisry might be upset, imagine there was something seriously wrong if I called in Broome."

"Let me go to Stirling and talk to him. I could bring him back as a friend, not introduce him professionally. Let him see Maisry off guard."

It was quickly arranged. By ten o'clock, Alan was speeding along the road south, a great relief in his mind that there was someone likely to listen to his fantastic, improbable story and discuss it without prejudice. So far as he knew Eliot Broome, the impossible and fantastic interested him profoundly. If only he'd come, and at once! Maisry must not endure last night's horror again.

He found Broome at home, and the specialist listened with immense concentration.

"Yes, I can come, and now!" he said. "I returned by an earlier ship than I had intended—meant to finish off some laboratory experiments before seeing patients. A few days in retreat, y'know. But this won't wait an hour; we'll talk on the drive back."

After lunch, at which Maisry did not appear, the Earl took the two younger men into his study. The father's idea was that Maisry needed a change of scene, that she was moping here at Gorm; and it was evident he knew nothing of her dream, or the fear that shadowed her life. He would strongly have resented the idea of his daughter sharing the vulgar superstitions of the countryside; he appreciated Red Alastair as a picturesque legend but not as an existent contemporary.

After their conference, Alan took his ally over to the Keep.

"God! It's altered again!"

Alan, who had made straight for the Picture, regarded it with angry incredulity.

"It was a clear late afternoon scene when I left it. There was no figure. Just bare spring landscape. Now the man's back in it again! He was right up in the mist when I first saw this infernal thing; I thought it a clever dodge of the painter—that solitary tiny figure emphasized the vast desolate moor. Now—look at that, will you!"

The two stared. On the road, not a mile from the entrance-gate to Gorm, and facing toward it, a man's figure was painted. Insolently, he seemed to dominate the lovely, lonely Glen, and his uncovered head burned red as fire under leaden skies.

Alan's face set like a mask. With loathing, he noted the changed aspect of the Picture, its gloom and shadow and brooding horror; a scene from Dante's purgatory rather than the living, burgeoning earth.

"Even the star is in it again," he muttered. "The Dark Star." His companion looked long at the blood-red portent over Vorangowl. "The star is Red Alastair's signal, then! A sort of challenge."

In striking contrast with Alan's quicksilver energy, Broome stood regarding the Picture; his massive proportions, leonine head, and slow deliberate movements typical of the man. Alan was all speed and movement and quick fiery courage, lean and swift and dangerous in anger as a black panther. Broome's was a slow, deadly, precise strength that makes no mistakes, that waits to strike and never misses; superbly master of himself, he was a man to seek as desert-travelers turn to the shelter of a rock.

"You consider this," Broome's quiet voice began, "the work of a man, some tremendous work of genius?"

The other looked at him, his lean face, his black eyes cold, furious, implacable.

"It's a trick, a damnable hellish trick—to put the wind up—to unnerve me. Why not? He's had two hundred years to learn, to practice his infernal game."

The specialist regarded him with pity, with comprehension.

"I was prepared to accept your theory, that Red Alastair was a miracle-man, a marvel who had discovered the secret of perpetuating life. The secret could—it will—be discovered! *But this Picture is not the work of a man.* It proves that Red Alastair died—in the flesh."

Alan turned an impatient eye on his companion. "What proves it?" he demanded.

"He couldn't accomplish that," Broome's eyes narrowed on the Picture, "while he was still bound by human limitations in his body. He had to say good-bye to that body before journeying to the hell where such magic was learned. Red Alastair is dead. The Picture is an open door by which he comes and goes to that far hell of his."

Alan flung a defiant look at the painted moors. "If there's a way to open a door, there must be a way to close it."

"Undoubtedly! As we saw in the records, though, a door of this nature can't be manipulated in any obvious way."

The other nodded gloomy assent. "They seem to have tried everything. Painting it out—cutting it out—every sort of destruction . . ."

"And each failure gave new advantage to the enemy."

"How's that?"

"Because," Broome answered, "they actively acknowledged Red

Alastair's power. Without defense or understanding, they offered combat and he won. His existence in our world depended, and still depends, on such victories."

The Picture gleamed sullen, threatening, unchanged upon the wall. Unchanged ! Not quite. The man's face was lifted, flung back, its eyes green as a storm-wave in the lightning's glare.

Alan's eyes met them unflinching; he gave back look for look, he seemed to project his very soul to thrust back the power in that painted evil face. Broome, acutely aware of the sudden impact of will against will, stood like stone: he bent the whole weight of his strong, disciplined mind to Alan's need. Then, like the snapping of a twig, it was over. The strain, the tension, the unbearable pressure ceased. Alan's breath was expelled in a long quivering sigh, he leaned his weight on Broome's shoulder, turned a gray face and sunken eyes.

"Let's get out — away from this."

With eloquent gesture he turned and left the tower, his companion close behind. They walked across the intervening space in silence, stood at the castle entrance to look back at the gray, ominous Keep.

"I was wrong !" Alan's voice was hoarse. "Reason — fact — logic — all wrong ! It's neither genius nor science behind Red Alastair's devilish Picture. It's black magic, it's from hell."

"Don't blame yourself; no sane man would accept the true explanation without proof — the sort of proof you've had." Broome put a hand on Alan's shoulder. "Can you arrange for us to see Lady Maisry now, and be undisturbed for the next hour ? There's only a bare margin of safety for her; she must never, as you said, follow *him* on that road again; she'd not survive it."

"If she went away, now, at once, within the hour ! Out of the country ! She could fly across to . . . "

Alan stopped at the other's decisive gesture.

"Physical distance is a factor that does not count. The man, the devil she follows on that moorland road can summon her at will — from across the world. It is the soul, the ego, the flame within the lamp of clay that is subject to Red Alastair: the body is a thing apart, governed by different laws and limitations."

THEY WENT UPSTAIRS and were admitted by a maid to Lady Maisry's apartments. Alan sent a message.

The girl quickly returned. "Yes, my lord, at once! And this gentleman, also. Will you come to her sitting-room, please?"

The two waited in a room that hung like a nest high up in the southwest wing of Gorm castle. Its window thrust out in a semicircular sweep over a bit of wild uncultivated ground below — long grass and daffodils tossed together, and bushy willow-stumps flashed in sun and wind beside a shallow stream whose soft chuckle sounded in the room through widely opened windows.

How like Maisry, how like her strange lovely self, this room! Straight from the devil-haunted tower, it seemed to Alan as velvet-sweet and fresh as a copse of wood-violets.

She came in to them at once. Her eyes, their cloud-gray beauty repeated in the chiffons of her dress, showed immense fatigue — dark pools no fresh quick source could stir, no sun touch to happy life again. Her face was pale as ivory; she moved across the room slowly, with trained habitual grace, but could not hide her deathly weariness.

Eliot Broome made up his mind at once. Here was one who deserved no less than truth. She was a fighter, strong, and able to endure. He explained himself without preamble, begged her to let him put what knowledge and resources he had at her disposal. She met him with equal directness.

"It is good of you — quite extraordinarily kind — to have come so quickly. Everyone knows your fame, your skill. Tell me one thing, first, and I want the absolute truth, please, Mr. Broome. Alan has told you about my dream?"

The specialist nodded.

"And that I connect it with Red Alastair and his Picture?"

Again he gave grave assent.

"You know, then, that I consider myself to be haunted by this ancestor of mine; and, knowing this, do you believe that I am unbalanced, my nerves deranged, my brain affected?"

"Dear Lady Maisry, I believe you to be as sane as I am, very sane and unusually well-balanced. That is the reason you can bear to hear the truth from me."

She grew very white. "I understand. I am in danger — in deadly peril?"

"Yes," he agreed. "In more than mortal peril; yet, courageous as you are, I would not confess this if I did not know you could be rescued."

Light flashed, died out again in her eyes, gray as lake-water at dawn. She shook her golden head.

"Please, not that! I dare not, dare not think along those lines. I am

one of the ill-fated of my line. In life, in death, *he* cannot be defeated."

Broome rose to his feet, took her two hands, and drew her up to face him. His eyes, his voice, were stern.

"Listen to me, Lady Maisry. That is a piece of unwisdom I had not dreamed you could say, or believe. It is just such unquestioning belief in Red Alastair that has enabled him to remain earthbound, expanding his mad rapacious ego to colossal dimensions. *His existence depends utterly on people's faith and fear.*"

She stood rigid in his grasp, her face fixed in tense abstracted thought. "But he—he is more than man! He is a devil—served by devils. It is not one human soul against another, it never has been that. You do not know Red Alastair's history, nor does Alan; there has been so little time."

"No. We have only glanced at the records. Is there any special reason why you are haunted? Are all the women of your family tormented?"

"No. I am the first; the first woman that has had '*the sight*'. And the reason why he—why he calls me, draws me after him, is this . . . "

She took up a small shabby leather case from a table at her side and opened it to show an oval miniature set in pale gold with rim of pearls. The two men looked at it and at her.

"A lovely portrait of you," Alan said.

"No—not of me. That was painted in 1700. It is a portrait of an ancestor of mine on my mother's side—Lady Jean Haugh. Red Alastair stole her on her wedding-day, snatched her from the bridegroom's side as the pair stood before the priest, and rode off with her. To escape him, she flung herself off the cliff-path on the Kaims of Vorangowl. He was riding recklessly, as always, and no doubt his grasp of her loosened as he held up his frightened horse. This is all in the records, and there were many witnesses to this particular crime; for it was April and shepherds were all out on the moors tending the ewes and lambs."

"Then Lady Jean Haugh did actually defeat him for once!"

"Not finally. She merely postponed his victory. He has waited some two hundred years for her. And now—here am I."

"Exactly. Here are you. And you are not the Lady Jean Haugh."

"Physically I am, to the last gold hair; and more than that Red Alastair would not recognize. There is no time now to tell you more fully of his life; one year was like another to him, blood and battle, riding and fighting. But chiefly women—the records are black with their names—their unspeakable fate."

Eliot Broome watched the girl narrowly. His next question made Alan

start and lean forward with hands suddenly cold and shaking, the pulses throbbing at his temples.

"And you? You have not thought of escaping as Lady Jean escaped?"

Maisry did not shrink. The idea was evidently a familiar one. "My unwisdom, as you call it, is not so great as that. Nor do I count suicide escape—from anything."

Broome's square rugged face lightened. "Ah, now you are wise, indeed. If you will continue to think with such intelligence and courage, I repeat—Red Alastair can be defeated."

Again she shook her head. "You scarcely know how truly monstrous he is, and was from the beginning. Oh, they are not old wives' tales, the records of his birth and life and death. They come from varying sources, perfectly sound and authentic, and all agree that he was monstrous, devil-possessed from birth."

"And his death? What is recorded of that?"

"It was never recorded as proved fact. He lived alone at Gorm after Lady Jean's death; entirely, mysteriously alone, cut off from every human being. No one took food to the castle, no one saw him outside its walls. But at night the Keep would blaze with light—and books say 'ringed about with most infernal fire', and thin high pipings and whistlings echoed to the hills. It was a terror in the countryside for three years."

"And then?"

"The old castle of Gorm was burned to the ground. It blazed and smoldered for nights and days. No one would go near it. Only the Keep was left standing."

"And the Picture? Is it mentioned in the early records?"

Alan, listening, strained forward to hear her reply.

"Yes." Loathing dawned in her eyes. "Duncan, tenth Earl of Glenhal-lion, inherited after Gorm was burned. Red Alastair had vanished, although his bones were never found, and the popular belief was that he had not died in the fire. Duncan rebuilt the castle as it stands now, and attempted to destroy what was recorded in those days as 'a most strange and foule magick'. Instead, he was himself destroyed, his body found on the battlements with a broken back."

Alan frowned, turned to Broome.

"At least, Alastair was living then! He must have been responsible for that murder."

"But many have died like that," Maisry went on. "Many have tried to destroy the Picture. For almost two hundred years men have tried, and failed, and died most horribly."

"Opposing the psychical with the physical." Broome's massive head was hunched between his shoulders, his abstracted gaze bent on the carpet. "Red Alastair died. He exists in another state of being. He must be met, opposed, conquered in that other state."

Alan's words came slow and weighted. "I would not acknowledge that before. I've been bluffing myself. I knew he was something—not human—when first I saw him on the battlements. I dared not admit it. It seemed too difficult, too dangerous. I was afraid."

Tears came to Maisry's eyes. Broome's smile, however, was a benediction. "Now you've come to grips with yourself. Of course you're afraid. What do you expect? You're human, not a devil like Red Alastair."

"What I mean, more precisely," Alan continued in the same slow painful way, "is that I recognize at last what must be done—and I'm prepared to do it. I know in the main, that is; I shall leave details to you."

"I can give you protection. I can prepare you for the journey. Beyond that none can help."

"What journey? What are you both talking about?" Maisry broke in with quick breathless words. "Alan! You mustn't—you're not dreaming of . . ."

He took her hand, kissed the fingers that clung to his. She turned to Broome, her hand still holding fast to Alan's.

"Tell me! Tell me! What are you going to let him do? Protection, you said. Oh, what are you going to do?—where is Alan going?"

"Don't break now, my dearest." Alan rose and stood before her. "I need your help, all you can give."

"All you can give," echoed Broome, and his tone touched her to profound stillness. "You have a capacity for faith. It is two-edged quality. You brought Red Alastair into the compass of your existence by your faith in him and his power to do you harm. You can transfer that faith to Alan and his power to conquer Red Alastair. You must choose. There can be no compromise. Do you believe in Alan's power to defeat your enemy, or do you not?"

Her look turned to Alan's straight, tall figure. He was changed, much changed since his surrender to the deep-hidden unconscious self he had so long ignored. His dark Pharaoh look of impenetrable command and dignity added a decade to his years.

As she watched him, amazement swamped her fear. It was not possible to conceive defeat for this regal-looking man. "I fight for you, Alan. I believe in *you*."

He looked long into her eyes, saw all that lay behind her spoken

words, and took her hand as if to seal a compact. "Then we're ready now for the fight — for the victory."

He turned to Broome. "We are of one mind now, one resolve, utterly and completely one."

TWO GREAT SEVEN-BRANCHED CANDELABRA, on massive stands, reached tall as young trees on either side of the fireplace. Their candles showed the Picture in warm golden light. Through the barred, unglassed windows, night air drifted mild and sweet with scent of hawthorn, mingling with tang of wood and leaves that glowed and sizzled in a brazier upon the hearth.

A truckle-bed showed dimly in a corner of the dining-hall; two light gardenseats and a great pile of wood and many thick white candles were also visible.

"You are sure, you swear, that Maisry is safe? To wait here while she, perhaps, is — "

Broome interrupted him. "I know she is safe. For *her* I can absolutely vouch. For you, it is different; I can only protect you up to a point; the issue depends entirely on yourself after that. Your will against his. You are taking the most fantastic risk, as I warned you. If you lose, if your endurance and courage are mastered by him for an instant, you are mastered for all time. You will become what he is — a devil; you will work for him, yes, even if it means helping to bait the Lady Maisry to hell!"

"Never!" There was none of Alan's wonted fire and scorn in his voice; emotion was stripped from him, human attributes consumed by divine unbending will. "You are sure, then? She is tired, ill, she may fall asleep. And in sleep Red Alastair calls her."

"You don't know the laws that govern other states of being, but, believe me, Red Alastair is restricted in his activities as we are ourselves. Laws of gravity, of magnetism, of attraction and repulsion, of growth and decay, of tides and winds and electricity — all the myriad laws that govern us and our objective world have their parallels in other worlds."

"Who makes them?"

"Who makes ours?" was the quiet response. "Fire burns you; a fall from a height will break you in pieces! Why?"

"Because we're made of human stuff, perishable matter."

"And do you imagine that, free of your body, you cannot suffer or perish? Red Alastair, I repeat, has no power to pass the barriers that protect Lady Maisry for this one night."

"And after that?"

"Her protection will be in your power."

Broome turned abruptly to the wall. "Watch! Watch the Picture, on your life! He mustn't see you first. He mustn't call you to him. The attack must be from you."

The two men stood shoulder to shoulder, their gaze sternly set upon the Picture. A faint copper tinge darkened its evening sky, gray haze began to cloud the heights, shadows fell across the wide moors, the woods, and glen; the long road seemed a net flung down—a trap—a sinister living thing that coiled and waited for its prey.

Mist thickened and spread upon the heights, and Broome's hand went to his breast pocket. He drew out a small phial and unstoppered it, pressed it into Alan's hand.

"Keep your eyes on the mist, on the mist above Vorangowl. He is coming. Drink this, *on the instant*, when his figure appears. He must not catch you in the body."

The coppery gleam deepened in the sky, focussed, concentrated to a center. The Dark Star shone out over the broad estate of Glenhallion; and, on the far horizon of the Picture, mist rose, wreathed, and crept across the sullen moors . . . blind herald of doom.

Alan stood with the phial to his lips, breathing slowly, evenly. The hand that held the little clouded glass was steady, his dark brows met in a frown of concentration over eyes black as a deep tarn in winter, and as cold. The fine bones of his face showed under taut muscles and sunken cheeks.

On the heights of Vorangowl, on a craggy spur of rock above the fatal gorge and dizzy cliff-path, the mists grew thin . . . parted . . . swirled aside. A figure, a mere black speck, but infinitely menacing, was visible.

Swift as a bird's flash, Alan drank. The phial slipped, crashed to the stone floor.

Broome's strong arms were about him instantly, supporting him, lifting him to the truckle-bed in the corner. Blind, deaf, empty shell, his body lay there as Broome turned quickly back to the Picture.

Watching it, his heart seemed to turn over in his breast. The dread he had concealed from Alan racked him now.

"Gone. Beyond all help, all knowledge now. Fighting alone, unaided. Following—following that devil—even to hell."

Then, in the Picture, he saw Alan signal from the Keep, across the gulf of time and space the painted surface bridged; signal from the battlements. Next moment, Broome saw his tall light figure running through

the grounds, through the gates, along the road that led to Vorangowl. Swiftly, swiftly Alan's feet carried him, borne by the impetus of his strong will.

Now the glen lay behind him; the wooded Kaims closed about him jealously. On, on he went, past threat of glooming trees, past barren reaches of the upper glen.

Broome watched, his heart going as if he himself ran across the fatal spellbound moors. He could see Red Alastair fighting his way downward — restrained by Alan's stronger impetus — taken unawares. Ah, Red Alastair was gaining ground now! If he reached the cliff-path, if he crossed it first, then Alan must suffer terribly. It was clear the fact was apprehended by both adversaries.

All Red Alastair's unbridled longing, his mad unappeasable desire, had focussed on the scene of his defeated lust. For two hundred years his restless, terrible ghost had wandered there, watching, waiting. The cliff and rocky narrow trail were deep imprinted with his torment, his deathless hate.

Swifter, swifter Alan ran, up the steeps, over heather and stony tracts, on — on — on. And, from the mists, Red Alastair loomed larger; the balefire of hair and beard gleamed. From either end, the two antagonists approached the fatal wall of rock.

Broome leaned forward, his whole consciousness centered on Alan's last tremendous effort. "He's done it! He's there first!"

The quiet thankful voice rang in the still room and the candles flared in answer, showing every detail on the painted wall.

On the dizzy edge of space, Alan took the path lightly, easily; and, on its further side, Red Alastair bulked gigantic, the mist recoiling — leaving him in space — alone — waiting . . .

Alan had crossed, flashed upon his enemy — closer, closer, until to Broome's sight there scarcely seemed a yard between them. Then, for a long moment of torture, both figures were motionless. Broome well understood the meaning of that titanic pause. Will battled with will. One must retreat, one pursue.

The Picture suddenly assumed the look of some vast amphitheater: hollow curving mountain ranges, their crested heads upreared, closed in upon the combatants. Beyond them, screened by vaporous mist, Broome was aware of watchers, felt the pressure of their blind malevolence.

"So," he whispered, "Red Alastair is not come alone!"

A knife seemed to twist in his heart as he watched; every moment was

a year of horror; every instant of the grim rigid contest meant unspeakable effort to Alan.

The mist rolled blindly, it wrapped about Red Alastair, drew him back, back to the heights. And Alan followed on.

Broome was aware that he followed with sure and steady purpose, more and more slowly, growing smaller, dimmer at every step. The Kaims of Vorangowl were being blotted out. Mist rose on every side. The hills, the glen, the woods were only smears of vague color. Now the foreground and the corner of the old Keep vanished. Only the Dark Star shone with metallic copper glow and showed Alan's tiny, toiling figure going upward — upward. It reached the farthest peak, showed for a flashing second, black, tiny, remote; then it was lost.

Broome's eyes ached; he closed them, opened them again. No it was really over now. The Picture on the wall was only a gray dull blur moving swirling mist. Not a stone, not a leaf, not a blade of grass was visible. Even the Dark Star had sunk, its blood-red gloom wiped out. Mist — impenetrable, blinding, moving mist hid everything.

6

TWO LONG DAYS DRAGGED TO EVENING. The weary terrifying hours of a third night closed on Gorm. Maisry, sleepless and worn, went at midnight to share Broome's vigil.

Nothing was changed. The candles, burning in a windless night, showed nothing more — only gray surging clouds of mist in ceaseless movement. The Picture was like the crater of a volcano where smoke eddied and swung in the void before the destroying fire burst up from its depths.

The watchers saw no change in Alan's face except, perhaps, a deeper shadow of repose. It was a sign, Broome knew, that he was farther and farther away with every passing hour — following — following through space — on and on to dim uncertain perilous horizons where the finite mind can no longer function.

Broome faced his thought steadily, though it was overwhelming in its horror. Had Red Alastair the power to lead on to voids no mortal spirit can endure? His straining eyes grew more intent.

"Something is moving behind the mist," he said.

A rift showed at the top of the Picture; a glimpse of pale sky, a tooth of jagged rock appeared. Thin wispy trails floated across the rift. Gradually, as if rent and shredded by a furious wind, the whole horizon cleared

to show a colorless cloudless sky and moorland heights, below which a sea of mist still whirled and eddied to and fro.

But no figure was visible. Until long past dawn the two kept watch, their eyes red-rimmed and aching, but a cold pale sky and desolate peaks of Vorangowl mocked them with their emptiness.

Broome had watched narrowly in all the long hours for some change in Alan, too; but it did not come. The day passed and the fourth night passed. Dawn of the fifth day approached. Broome and Maisry once more shared the vigil, for he had warned her it was the most pregnant of the twenty-four hours.

The Picture showed the same chill breadth of sky and sharp-toothed crags. The rest was veiled. It was in Alan's face that Broome read indication of a crisis. Its indescribable look of sphinx-like, age-old remoteness was softened. The eyelids no longer gave the impression of carven lids that covered sightless eyes; they seemed merely to have drooped in sleep. A warmer, fuller outline curved cheek and jaw and temples.

"Alan! Alan!"

"No." Broome curtly stopped her. "It is the Picture you must watch. It is the door he must pass through to his body."

Round a tall spur of rock they saw a dark speck moving. Slowly—oh, very slowly—it came on. Impossible to see its face, its outline, or any distinguishing mark at all, but both knew at once who struggled there up on the heights of Vorangowl.

"Bring him back! Bring him back with all your will." Broome spoke to the trembling girl beside him but kept his eyes on the Picture. "He's done! You and I must give him strength—his is spent, and overspent."

They watched the efforts of the far-off lonely figure and tried to fight back their own despair. The road stretched so endlessly—so endlessly . . . Would that halting, stumbling traveler, so miraculously returning—would he ever reach his bourn?

Now it was full dawn in the green leafy actual world outside the Keep. Birds shook the spell of silence into sound. Long rosy fingers of sunlight thrust through an east window and touched the dusty floor. The candles, paling ghostly sentries, burned on.

Dawn too, it seemed, in the changing Picture. Behind Alan the sky grew light, throwing sun and shadow on the heights he had passed. But in front of him the road wound into mist and shadows—shadows that fell blackest and most impenetrably into the deep gorge which the cliff-path skirted.

Once more that haunted cliff-path must be crossed. Could Alan traverse it? Could he control his swooning weariness on its sharp edge?

"Good, ah, good ! His will holds firm."

Broome's voice sank to a deep exultant note as they saw Alan drop on hands and knees to crawl along the path. Maisry watched with pain too overpowering for tears. She spoke to him as if he were close beside her, as if she trod the path before him.

"Dear — it is halfway now. We will rest on the other side. Follow, follow me — a little more — a little more. Ah, you will not let me go alone — Alan ! Alan ! Come with me . . . come . . . "

Broome marveled at her. And Alan's face lifted as if he saw her on the path before him; now and again he put out a hand as if to touch her own. It was full noon when at last he reached the end of the path and lay on the heather slopes beyond.

Until sunset, Maisry coaxed and pleaded and besought the figure on the painted Picture. With Broome beside her, aiding her strength, her wisdom, she fought for Alan, bringing him mile after weary mile along the dark glen road, bringing him back across the cursed painted miles from hell, back to the warmth and beauty of his own green earth, to her and to her love.

The sun sank low, and lower. And still Alan was outside the gates of Gorm. Candlelight showed him on the endless road, swaying and lurching with weariness beyond control. More than once he fell, but rose and stumbled on in answer to Maisry's low entreating words of love. Then at last he fell and did not rise; he seemed deaf to her voice, her pleadings, her tenderness.

Behind him, the long road was clear of mist and shadow, but the foreground he had not yet passed still lay obscure and dark.

Maisry turned imperiously to her companion. "A chair ! Put one close that I may touch him, help him up again."

He saw her climb and lean close until her hands could touch the exhausted broken figure lying on the road. Close, close to the painted wall, her moving tender hands seemed to raise, to lift him to his feet. Once more, miraculously, he dragged himself forward — on — on to the gates of Gorm. He reached them, passed through and was swallowed up in velvet darkness of the trees.

No shred of mist remained in all the Picture. In its foreground, the gray Keep abruptly thrust up, grim, boding, expectant.

Dimly in the starlight, someone bulked faintly, uncertainly upon the battlements. Broome's lips formed a word: "Alan !"

The name died on a sudden breath of horror. It was not Alan who so monstrously obscured the stars. It was a heavier figure. It moved, turned,

thrust forward a great head. Ah, that demon's face, that flaming beard and hair!

Broome leaped to Maisry's side, to draw her away, to interpose himself between her—leaning forward, her golden head and lovely face not a foot from the painted Keep—and the peering lustful mask. But she resisted him, thrust back his hands, turned a changed face and eyes that flashed like swords full on Red Alastair. She was a golden flame of anger.

"Go back!" her voice rang in the echoing room like bugles blown for war. "Dead, cursed thing—go back to your own hell! Dead—defeated—forgotten ghost! I am not afraid! Back—back to hell!"

The thing upon the tower roof shrank, wavered, dwindled in the starlight. Maisry's eyes pierced it, followed it, tortured it. The monstrous bulk grew vaporous, insubstantial as a web, a dusty cobweb flung on the massive wall. The web, caught by a breath of wind, was torn from its last slight moorings—tossed from the Keep—drifted from sight . . .

As it vanished, the Picture cracked across and across. Its painted scene faded, dissolving, disintegrating, obliterated by the all-pervading dust of centuries. In a moment, nothing remained of outline or of color. Above the hearth, a cracked and moldering wall showed in the golden candle-light.

Maisry sprang down, caught Broome's arm. "Now he can come to me! Now I am free! Alan! Alan! Alan!"

She knelt beside the truckle-bed. Alan lay still. He seemed to sleep, to dream. A faint smile curved his lips, and his heavy eyelids quivered. Maisry kissed the curving lips, the fluttering eyelids, until the dark eyes opened wide. His voice was a faint exhausted whisper.

"You came for me. You brought me home. I could not have won back—alone. Your voice—dearest—I followed it—your voice—your little hands . . ."

His eyes closed in weakness, then opened once again.

"I tried to warn you, to tell you he was coming, too. It was forbidden—I was not allowed! If you had been afraid—he would have had power—to stay. We had to fight—together, my beloved—together . . ."

He sank back to deep oblivion and sleep. Maisry, crouched beside him, let her head fall on the hands that clasped his own. Sleep folded her too, softly, suddenly.

Coming Next Issue

In 1813 the man who owned this house was crippled for life by an unknown assailant who tried to break in and get up into the attic. In 1942 someone else owned this property, and in that year a stranger killed a watch-dog and nearly strangled a servant in undertaking to enter the house and reach the attic. The year 1875 saw the third attempt take place . . .

All the countryside knew the evidence. What did it mean? What was in the attic to attract dangerous strangers — what something of staggering value? Nobody had ever found it; and, although armed with a difficult key to the riddle, I had been unable to find that hidden something myself in the short time since I had bought the house — and I had looked well.

True to the legend, in 1907 a man never seen before in that generation called at the house and made a desperate dash for the attic. A whirlwind battle ended in his running away and escaping just as the police arrived.

The legend is exactly the same every time. One hundred and twenty years ago someone with the ferocity of a madman had sought to get into that region upstairs, by way of this door. The same thing happened every thirty years or so since, with the old typical touch and treatment. Were they different men each time? . . . The graybeards in the village believed that someone had clearly been trying over a century, making his every attempts to force his way toward some secret no one else had discovered, then lying low for thirty years and trying again; and again; and again . . . Not a human being . . .

Nothing had occurred since 1907 — but the usual thirty year interval was almost gone by.

*What Was The Secret That A Strange Being Sought?
Don't Miss*

THEY CALLED HIM GHOST

by Laurence J. Cahill

It Is Written...

The experiment of running the titles of verse on the preference page has proven to be as unsatisfactory in its results here as it was in *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES*. More than 50% did not "rate" the verse at all, even though tying it with some story would have been acceptable enough. However, that's easy to say; when it comes down to the line, many stated that while they enjoyed Robert E. Howard's verse, they were puzzled as to just where they would want to rate it in relation to the stories; and others stated their honest feeling that you just can't rate poetry or verse along with prose—it's like, as one reader put it, trying to add oranges to apples. (This, I think I've said before, was my feeling from the start; though were I asked to vote the way you were invited to, I suppose I'd try to comply by tying the verse with one of the stories in most instances. At times I might let it stand alone in some spot if I felt that it was distinctly better than some of the stories.) In any event, the message from you, the readers, is clear; asking you to

vote on verse along with the stories tends to confuse matters, so you won't see any further listing of verse on the preference page. I can always report whether more of those who mentioned a poetic offering liked it than disliked it; and perhaps that is really all we needed in the first place.

David Charles Paskow writes: "Thank you for your editorial in the January 1968 MOH. I have, in the past, started many efforts at weird stories (up till then being content to receive rejection slips for my science fiction efforts) only to lay them aside, unfinished. As a junior at Temple University (major: English) I haven't had much time for creative activities. Your editorial has convinced me to make time.

"MOH #19 was a rather meaty issue, wordwise. Are you using a different type face or printing process? I seem to have sensed a subtle change in the past two issues; perhaps it's only that you're varying story lengths more than usual, with short-shorts, shorts, and novelets.

"The idea of references to stories in your other magazines on similar ideas (of references on pages 32 and 59) is constructive—it links your magazines together, yet still allows each a separate personality.

"The cover of the January issue was poor. Unusual for a Finlay cover, but true. In a word, it was hollow.

"Inside it was a well-balanced issue—three departments (four, if you count *The Reckoning*), three short-shorts, two novelets, and a verse. I think that Marie Greenberg should have liked this issue and should reconsider her opinion of the 'uselessness' of *The Editor's Page*, as stated on page 115 of MOH #19."

Yes, we changed typesetters, and our new compositors did not have the same type faces that we had been using with the former ones. So I took advantage of the occasion to select a type which, it seemed to me, would be attractive, readable, and still allow for a few more characters a line. And now, as you see, we are shifting toward setting all the fiction wide(book style) which should add to readability and might give us a few more words, too. It makes for simpler type-setting, although we actually use tape, not type; and while—perfection eluding us as ever—you may still find typographical errors in the printed magazines, there's a sporting chance of more of them being caught and corrected, as the wide galleys are easier to read than the narrow ones.

Thus far, you're the only one to express positive disapproval of the cover, which was originally drawn by Mr. Finlay to illustrate a passage from *The Ancient Mariner*—the

one starting "Like one that on a lonesome road" and ending with "a fearsome fiend doth close behind him tread." I had hoped to mention this and quote the entire passage; but, alas, it was necessary to change my address this summer, and when the time came my copy of Coleridge was somewhere in a mass of unboxed books. Nor have I managed to get entirely settled yet, so it's still there—if it wasn't lost. (The fiend-haunted editor does not have the time to dash up to the Library, or prowl around the second-hand book stores on such occasions.)

Thomas S. Dilley, presents three points: "#1 Far prefer stories to be chosen by quality, with no regard to length. Many (probably most) of the best weird-horror stories have required length to develop effect.

"#2: If, by any unfortunate, overwhelming consensus, you are forced to cut departments, I hope that the book reviews, or, at the very least, a listing of recently published weird-horror books, will be the last to go. It's difficult enough to find out about recent titles as it is.

"#3: You might inform Reader Greenberg of the cover vs present prices of a mint Volume One Number One issue of *WEIRD TALES* (is there such a thing?). Finding back-number horror still in print and buying from the original publisher at cover price is a rare privilege."

Well, Friend Dilly, there is such a thing as a very good copy of Volume One, Number One of *WEIRD TALES* (March 1923). I bought one for \$35 back in the mid-50's—a very reasonable price at that time, I might

**Did You Miss Our
Very First Issue?**

#1, August 1963: *The Man With a Thousand Legs*, Frank Belknap Long; *A Thing of Beauty*, Wallace West; *The Yellow Sign*, Robert W. Chambers; *The Maze and the Monster*, Edward D. Hoch; *The Death of Halpin Frayser*, Ambrose Bierce; *Babylon: 70 M.*, Donald A. Wollheim; *The Inexperienced Ghost*, H. G. Wells; *The Unbeliever*, Robert Silverberg; *Fidel Bassin*, W. J. Stamper; *The Last Dawn*, Frank Lillie Polock, *The Undying Head*, Mark Twain.

Still available—but
we can't say how long
this will be true!

Order From Page 128

*Jules de Grandin
solves the riddle of*

**THE WHITE
LADY OF THE
ORPHANAGE**

by
Seabury Quinn
in the Spring issue of

**STARTLING
MYSTERY
STORIES**

say—and sold it to a friend just last year; deciding that I had no further need for it, and could get much more mileage from selling it and investing the proceeds in Mozart and Richard Strauss operas which I did not own at that time. We both feel that we got a good deal on that, as he is striving for a complete set of WT, something I decided was not worth the cost a few years ago.

Of course, I dream (who doesn't?) of some oldtimer getting in touch with me and saying, "RAWL, you've been doing a terrific job with your magazines. Say, you know, you use a lot of stuff from *WEIRD TALES* and I got a box of old magazines up in my attic, been there for years, and I'm sure there's some *WEIRD TALES* in it. All in practically new condition. Would you like to have them? I can put them in the car and bring them around if you'd like. No charge."

Of course, that old box contains WT from March 1923 right up to the Anniversary issue, without a break—and maybe the first year or so of the Farnsworth Wright issues. (I have all but five of the F. W. numbers: November, December 1924; February, March and June 1925). . . . And what fan doesn't have dreams like this relating to *some* favorite, long-gone publication!

Up to a reasonable point—my time for reading being limited—I'll review any and all weird/horror books sent to me by the publishers. Likewise science fiction reprints of material that first appeared in the 30s and earlier. Thus far, only Arkham House and Ace has been sending me such material.

"If you're going to take a poll

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Have You Missed These Issues?

#2, November 1963: *The Space-Eaters*, Frank Belknap Long; *The Faceless Thing*, Edward D. Hoch; *The Red Room*, H.G. Wells; *Hungary's Female Vampire*, Dean Lipton; *A Tough Tussle*, Ambrose Bierce; *Doorslammer*, Donald A. Wollheim; *The Electric Chair*, George Waight; *The Other One*, Jerry L. Keane; *The Charmer*, Archie Bigns; *Clarissa*, Robert A. W. Lowndes; *The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes*, Rudyard Kipling.

#3, Feb. 1964: *Out of print.*

#4, Sept. 1964: *Out of print.*

#5, September 1964: *Cassius*, Henry S. Whitehead; *Love at First Sight*, J. L. Miller; *Five-Year Contract*, J. Vernon Shea; *The House of the Worm*, Merle Prout, *The Beautiful Suit*, H. G. Wells; *A Stranger Came to Reap*, Stephen Dentinger; *The Morning the Birds Forgot to Sing*, Walt Liebscher; *Bones*, Donald A. Wollheim; *The Ghostly Rental*, Henry James.

#6, November 1964: *Caverns of Horror*, Laurence Manning; *Prodigy*, Walt Liebscher; *The Mask*, Robert W. Chambers; *The Life-After-Death of Mr. Thaddeus Warde*, Robert Barbour Johnson; *The Feminine Fraction*, David Grinnell; *Dr. Heidegger's Experiment*, Nathaniel Hawthorne; *The Pacer*, August Derleth; *The Moth*, H. G. Wells; *The Door to Saturn*, Clark Ashton Smith.

Order From Page 128

on the subject," writes *Charles Hidley*, "I'm for more shorts per issue and no long yarns like *Wolves of Darkness*. For those who must have the long reprints, why not serialize them, now that you're bi-monthly? And my immediate request is Quinn's *The Devil's Bride*—I've been unable to get all those installments together. The Howard poem was a bit too much to take, considering his demise, and almost in bad taste as a consequence.

"I enjoyed Dunsany's *A Night at the Inn* more in 6B than *The Jewels of Vishnu* now.

"The Finlay covers are fine—better than on *FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION*—even though very reminiscent. And the Senf illustrations are working out fine, albeit I hated him in the 30s."

Reader Hidley headed his remarks with the words "An exemplary issue", something always good to hear from a reader we have found to be difficult to please. It goes without saying others did not entirely agree.

Too much personal knowledge of an author can often get in the way of one's appreciation of his work, or a particular specimen of his work. This should not happen; the semanticists tell us that it indicates faulty identifications, etc.; but as the world actually is, this sort of thing does happen constantly. And it makes both for over and under estimations of an artist's value, or of the worth of a particular work; there's an awful lot of material which is either highly praised or highly disliked for the wrong reasons! . . . While I would hardly list Robert E. Howard as a great poet, I used to find—and still find—a number of his verses moving, or enjoyable,

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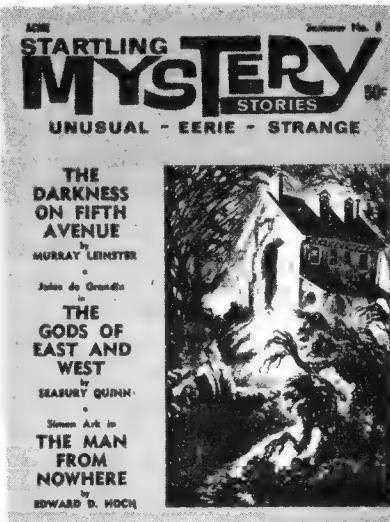
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Coming Soon

LEAPERS

by Robert A. W. Lowndes

Have You Missed These Issues?

#7, January 1965: *The Thing From—Outside*, George Allan England; *Black Thing at Midnight*, Joseph Payne Brennan; *The Shadows on the Wall*, Mary Wilkins-Freeman; *The Phantom Farmhouse*, Seabury Quinn; *The Oblong Box*, Edgar Allan Poe; *A Way With Kids*, Ed M. Clinton; *The Devil of the Marsh*, E. B. Marriott-Watson; *The Shuttered Room*, H. P. Lovecraft & August Derleth.

#8, April 1965: *The Black Laugh*, William J. Makin; *The Hand of Glory*, R. H. D. Barham; *The Garrison*, David Grinnell; *Passeur*, Robert W. Chambers; *The Lady of the Velvet Collar*, Washington Irving; *Jack*, Reynold Junker; *The Burglar-Proof Vault*, Oliver Taylor; *The Dead Who Walk*, Ray Cummings.

#9, June 1965: *The Night Wire*, H. F. Arnold; *Sacrilege*, Wallace West; *All the Stain of Long Delight*, Jerome Clark; *Skulls in the Stars*, Robert E. Howard; *The Photographs*, Richard Marsh; *The Distortion out of Space*, Francis Flagg; *Guarantee Period*, William M. Danner; *The Door in the Wall*, H. G. Wells; *The Three Low Masses*, Alphonse Daudet; *The Whistling Room*, William Hope Hodgson.

Order From Page 128

The Years Are As A Knife being in the first category. It presents an emotional attitude that is not difficult to understand even though I hardly share it now.

Richard Grose writes: "Please, please let's have some more stories of the caliber of Anna Hunger's *Ground Afire*. This is indeed a horror story worthy of the name, and I heartily endorse it with a 'O'. I did not enjoy this story in any way that the word 'weird' is usually used. Rather I should say after reading it I experienced a sense of depression and anxiety that at least in part is the true meaning of a sense of horror.

"My reaction to the Howard poem is based on an emotional response rather than on an intellectual or critical evaluation. I am aware of the tragic circumstances surrounding REH's death and this verse strikes me as a self-eulogy. It is at once both provocative and potent. I would be very interested in knowing when REH wrote it. The line, 'Better the shot, the fall, the growing stain, . . .' is particularly prophetic.

"I understand that a comment of L. Sprague de Camp's in regard to REH's suicide was that REH reacted to his mother's death by 'blowing his silly head off'. I see this more as a reaction to the loss than as an attempt to devalue Howard. I am sure that de Camp thought a great deal of Howard to say the least. I'll rate *The Years are as a Knife* '1' . . .

"As for *The Man from Cincinnati*, the ending became clear about half-way through the tale. I fear *The Wind in the Rose-Bush* held no secret revelation for me either. Perhaps I've

MASTERPIECES OF MYSTERY

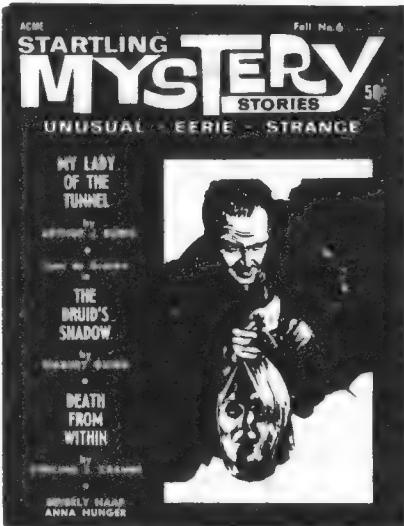
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WORMS OF THE EARTH
 by Robert E. Howard

Have You Missed These Issues?

#10, August 1965: *The Girl at Heddon's*, Pauline Kappel Prilucik; *The Torture of Hope*, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam; *The Cloth of Madness*, Seabury Quinn; *The Tree*, Gerald W. Page; *In the Court of the Dragon*, Robert W. Chambers; *Placide's Wife*, Kirk Mashburn; *Come Closer*, Joanna Russ; *The Plague of the Living Dead*, A. Hyatt Verrill.

#11, November 1965: *The Empty Zoo*, Edward D. Hoch; *A Psychological Shipwreck*, Ambrose Bierce; *The Call of the Mech-Men*, Laurence Manning; *Was It a Dream?*, Guy de Maupassant; *Under the Hau Tree*, Katherine Yates; *The Head of Du Bois*, Dorothy Norman Cooke; *The Dweller in Dark Valley*, (verse) Robert E. Howard; *The Devil's Pool*, Greyle Spina.

#12, Winter 1965/66: *The Faceless God*, Robert Bloch; *Master Nicholas*, Seabury Quinn; *But Not the Herald*, Roger Zelazny; *Dr. Muncing, Exorcist*, Gordon MacCreagh; *The Affair at 7 Rue de M.*, John Steinbeck; *The Man in the Dark*, Irwin Ross; *The Abyss*, Robert A. W. Lowndes; *Destination (verse)*, Robert E. Howard; *Memories of HPL*, Muriel E. Eddy; *The Black Beast*,* Henry S. Whitehead.

Order From Page 128

I've read too many ghost stories, and I'm jaded or something. I really don't know but I'll rate them a '3'. *The Last Letter from Norman Underwood*, rates a '3' also, more because I didn't dislike it than for anything I liked about it.

"*The Red Witch* and *The Last of Placide's Wife* exhibited some of the lacks and poor qualities you warn neophyte writers such as myself to avoid. Your editorial has some excellent points and I, for one, appreciate your advice. *The Red Witch* I'll rate '4' only because it was not as blatantly poor as *The Last of Placide's Wife*. As for the latter, let me give an example of why I dub it 'X': . . . It was horrible, I tell you! Those devils were lying there on our fellows, still and quiet, like dogs that have gorged on too much meat! Pff-f!

"Both *The Red Witch* and *The Last of Placide's Wife* were from the golden age' of WEIRD TALES in the 1930s. However, that doesn't make them sacred, and of course WT published a great deal of abominable trash as well as some fine tales.

"I realize that various tastes must be catered to if MOH is to survive. Though I vent my disapproval of particular yarns in MOH from time to time, I'll never give up reading MOH if you, from time to time, include first rate stories like *Ground Afire*."

For which, much thanks; and no less thanks to other readers who are willing to forgive us for stories like *Ground Afire* now and then, so long as we give them tales like *The Red Witch* and *The Last of Placide's Wife*, now and then.

I don't think that de Camp was try-

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Have You Missed These Issues?

#13, Summer 1966: *The Thing in the House*, H. F. Scotten; *Divine Madness*, Roger Zelazny; *Valley of the Lost*, Robert E. Howard; *Heredity*, David H. Keller; *Dwelling of the Righteous*, Anna Hunger; *Almost Immortal*, Austin Hall.

#14, Winter 1966/67: *The Lair of Star-Spawn*, Derleth & Scherer; *The Vacant Lot*, Mary Wilkins-Freeman; *Proof*, S. Fowler Wright; *Comes Now The Power*, Roger Zelazny; *The Moth Message*, Laurence Manning; *The Friendly Demon*, Daniel DeFoe; *Dark Hollow*, Emil Petaja; *An Inhabitant of Carcosa*, Ambrose Bierce; *The Monster-God of Mamiuth*, Edmond Hamilton.

#15, Spring 1967: *The Room of Shadows*, Arthur J. Burks; *Lillies*, Robert A. W. Lowndes; *The Flaw*, J. Vernon Shea; *The Doom of London*, Robert Barr; *The Vale of Lost Women*, Robert E. Howard; *The Ghoul Gallery*, Hugh B. Cave.

#16, Summer 1967: *Night and Silence*, Maurice Level; *Lazarus*, Leonid Andreyeff; *Mr. Octubur*, Joseph Payne Brennan; *The Dog That Laughed*, Charles Willard Diffin; *Ah, Sweet Youth*, Pauline Kappel Prilucki; *The Man Who Never Was*, R. A. Lafferty; *The Leaden Ring*, S. Baring-Gould; *The Monster of the Prophecy*, Clark Ashton Smith.

ing to devalue Howard as a writer at all, in the quotation you mention. REH likely knows now that Sprague was right in his implication that suicide over such circumstances is pretty silly. But then it's especially difficult for so "normal" a genius as L. Sprague de Camp to comprehend the agony of so "abnormal" a genius as Robert E. Howard—and I really don't think it is easy for anyone to comprehend, anyone who has not suffered the same way.

You're entirely right that some of the old stories we offer you contain any number of the defects that I (and innumerable others) warn young writers against today. These are still good stories, in spite of the defects—and those faults were just as bad in 1932 as they are now. I'm not sure that I agree with the quotation as a valid specimen—in fact, I'm sure I disagree. You're quoting dialogue, and this is just the sort of thing that the sort of person the speaker was would say in that situation; it's plausible. Were the sentence to appear as the author's text, rather than a character's statement, it would be different—and just about as bad as you think it is.

You'll see other stories from the old magazines in future issues which contain various writing faults; and the reason you'll see them will always be the same: my own conviction that these are good bizarre, or frightening, or gruesome, or strange, or horror stories for a' that.

Jack Cordes, who enjoyed *The Jewels of Vishnu* most and *Ground Afire* least in the January issue, tells us: "The Last of Placide's Wife, by Mashburn—a better than average

story of this type. It really moved along. Incidentally, after reading the story I looked up the illustration to the story in *WEIRD TALES*. No question but what Nelson gave away the ending. Seems as though the editorial office had misgivings about the nude Nita and hastily sketched on a bra. Looks rather odd to see a bare-bottomed Nita wearing a bra. Anyway, anything would be anti-climactic after seeing the Brundage cover on that particular issue.

"*The Man from Cincinnati*, by Horn — my sincere thanks to the person who recommended this little gem. Beautifully and touchingly written.

"*The Wind in the Rose-Bush*, by Wilkins-Freeman — I've yet to read a bad story by this lady. Good, competent workmanship — or should I say workwomanship?

"*The Red Witch*, by Dyalhis — frankly, I've always found Dyalhis rather wordy and the action tends to drag. *The Wind in the Rose-Bush* is almost thirty years older than *The Red Witch* and is smoother reading. But Dyalhis gets in a few good licks now and then.

"*The Last Letter From Norman Underwood*, by Meredith — I knew how this one turned out and it took some of the enjoyment away. But the style shows promise and I would like to see Meredith again."

After reading your letter, I, too looked up the Nelson illustration for *The Last of Placide's Wife*. Bigosh, you're right — it is a bra around her breasts; and all these years, in my innocence (if that's the word) I'd been assuming that it was his arm. But it can't be, unless the fellow has three arms. RAWL

Coming Soon

THE CASTLE IN THE WINDOW
by Steffan B. Alotti

Have You Missed These Issues?

#17, Fall 1967: *A Sense of Crawling*, Robert Edmond Alter; *The Laughing Duke*, Wallace West; *Dermod's Bane*, Robert E. Howard; *The Spell of the Sword*, Frank Aubrey; "Williamson", Henry S. Whitehead; *The Curse of Amen-Ra*, Victor Rousseau.

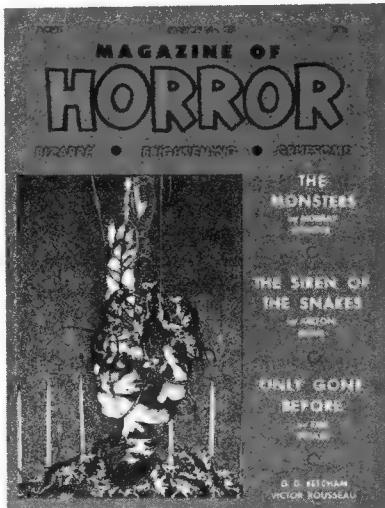
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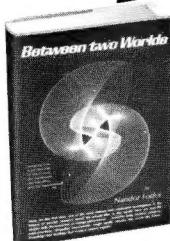
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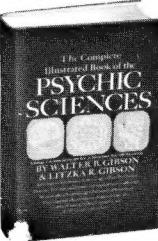
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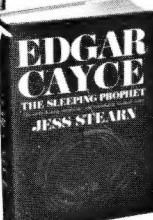
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